

Perceptions of Death among Older Adults:  
Integrating Terror Management Theory and the Lifespan Development Framework

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ABSTRACT

Terror management theory (TMT) seeks to understand religious worldview adherence, positing that worldview beliefs can abate existential threats such as mortality salience. Most research on TMT has employed young samples, so influences on older adults' experiences of mortality salience are unclear. Simultaneously, research on death anxiety shows that older people may view their own death more favorably than younger individuals do. Guided by the lifespan development perspective, I investigated whether the range of life experiences and interpretation of them might account for perceptions of death in old age. A multi-phase content analysis of in-depth interview transcripts from 16 adults aged 65+ focused on narratives of life events, religious worldviews, and death. The findings suggested how lifespan adversity, such as the death of a loved one, promoted growth in self and religious belief that enhanced participants' reported relationship with the sacred. In turn, participants' views of and beliefs about death were without fear, indicating the influence of highly individualized and deeply spiritual religious worldview beliefs on the abatement of death fear. These findings support extension of TMT to older people by identifying the impact of lifespan experiences with trauma and adversity as contributing to less superficial, more individualized conceptions of religious worldviews. Such worldviews, contingent upon growth from adaptation to lifespan experiences, may indeed lead to less death anxiety and reduce the effects of mortality salience in old age.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Religious experience transcends cultures, nationalities, and geographic boundaries; it permeates the global landscape and illustrates the universal human desire for meaning. The Pew Research Center reports that an estimated 84 percent of the global population, 5.8 billion people, identifies with a religious group (Pew, 2012). Of these, roughly 2.2 billion identify as Christian. Indeed, the presence of religion in the everyday lives of the majority of the global population reflects its importance for laypersons and researchers, alike.

Numerous theories and philosophies have been formulated to explain the human predilection to seek cosmic order among apparent chaos. Viktor Frankl (1959) called it *Man's Search for Meaning*; William James (1917) deemed it "The Will to Believe"; and Gordon Allport (1950) described *The Individual and His Religion*. Most of these conceptions of religion and spirituality, as well as many others, suggest the significance of religious experience in understanding loss, trauma, and decline (Pargament, 1997). Religious worldviews make meaning of otherwise overwhelming circumstances and can provide strength in times of struggle, most compelling of which is the threat of death. As a means to death transcendence through the Christian belief in salvation, religious worldviews can provide the obviation of death fear by making a good friend of a great terror. In describing the triumph of life's limitations, Ernest Becker (1973) characterized worldview belief as "more than merely an outlook on life: it is an immortality formula" (p. 255).

Despite its pervasiveness in the scholarship on end-of-life concerns, the intersection of religious worldviews and death perceptions remains largely unidimensional. Steeped in psychological tradition, this scholarship reduces spirituality to cognitive necessity and purports

that individuals *use* religion rather than *experience* religion. Further, the majority of these traditions focus on the individual as static and unchanging; this limited elaboration of the possibility of change over time neglects the impact of the experience of living.

### **Gaps in the Literature: Understanding Worldviews Developmentally**

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991, 1998) is a social psychological perspective that seeks to understand religious worldview adherence and posits that worldview beliefs serve to abate existential threats, often studied as mortality salience. Using Ernest Becker's (1973) argument that death avoidance is the mainspring of all human behavior, TMT is inherently motivational and, subsequently, reductionist. Nonetheless, the prevalence of studies utilizing TMT confirms its empirical significance and utility in understanding many aspects of human behavior.

Despite the almost 600 empirical publications focusing on TMT, none have addressed change in worldview as it relates to self and belief across the lifespan nor explored the implications of such changes for advancing TMT theory, while only few have explored TMT among older people (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Cicirelli, 2002; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). The available scholarship reveals that older people respond differently to the prospect of death than younger people (Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999), with some researchers arguing that worldview beliefs are the source of variation (Fung, 2013). Indeed, TMT applied to the lifespan and, further, using qualitative analysis to focus on the complex intersection of death and religious experience, is an underdeveloped area of research.

### **Significance and Overview of the Current Study**

The goal of the present study is to explore the theoretical possibilities of extending TMT to older people using a lifespan developmental perspective (Baltes, 1987). The aim is to

understand lifespan influences that may contribute to more positive perceptions of and reactions to death in old age. Qualitative data from a sample of 16 older men and women from the United States and Germany were analyzed. These older people were spiritual nominees with steadfast religious worldviews whose exceptional understandings of life and its difficulties may inform scholarship on end-of-life issues.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In the first part of this literature review, I will begin with an analysis of terror management theory, its development as an empirically robust area of scholarship, and its application to older people. Then, in the second part of this literature review, I will present six areas of research—lifespan development, religion and spirituality, growth from adversity, resilience, hardiness, and wisdom—that can enhance terror management theory as a model of development over the lifespan.

### **Terror Management Theory**

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991, 1998) describes the human need for meaning and self-esteem engendered by the juxtaposition of self-preservation and reminders of one's death. Heavily informed by Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973), TMT was developed on the presumption that all human behavior is motivated by death avoidance. Terror management theorists argue that death reminders such as age-related loss and decline threaten the human desire for permanence (i.e., the continuation of living despite the imminence of death threat) and require mechanisms through which permanence may be achieved. Accordingly, humans develop cultural worldviews, which are belief systems with the tacit purpose of abating thoughts of death.

Cultural worldviews are central to TMT and refer to socially constructed beliefs about the



nature of the world. Solomon and colleagues (1991) noted that all cultural worldviews are religious in nature, depending on faith as a measure of veracity. Cultural worldviews are socially constructed and, therefore, are dependent upon socio-historical influences. Cultural worldviews, in turn, provide meaning permanence through either literal or symbolic immortality. Literal immortality represents the human belief in an afterlife, whereas symbolic immortality is any shared belief system found to be meaningful to the individual and that continues beyond an individual's death. Immortality, both literal and symbolic, is reserved for individuals who adhere to the tenets of their respective worldviews. According to TMT, adhering to worldview beliefs imbues individuals with self-esteem, providing them with the belief that they are contributing meaningfully to something that transcends death. In this view, individuals sharing the same worldview beliefs are considered to be *similar others*, while those who hold different beliefs are referred to as *different others*. The existence of different others threatens the mutually exclusive claims to immortality established through the worldview shared with similar others, suggesting a view of different others as moral transgressors.

Two main hypotheses have been explored within the TMT framework: the mortality salience hypothesis and the self-esteem as an anxiety buffer hypothesis (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991, 1998). The self-esteem as anxiety buffer hypothesis suggests that if self-esteem protects against anxiety then strengthening self-esteem should reduce anxiety. Greenberg and colleagues (1992) used a series of experiments to demonstrate that experimentally raised self-esteem effectively reduced death arousal more than lower or neutral self-esteem conditions. Earlier studies indicated that decreased death arousal was present for individuals with characteristically high self-esteem, as well (Greenberg et al., 1990). The derivation of self-esteem, however, is contingent upon worldview belief adherence. Terror management theorists

argue that by adhering to cultural worldview standards, individuals may derive a sense of value and meaning, which may promote higher self-esteem. This self-esteem, being indicative of functioning cultural worldviews, should then reduce the influence of threatening situations, such as death threat or the presence of different others, on eliciting defense responses necessary to maintain worldview defenses.

The mortality salience hypothesis, having been utilized in over 277 experiments in two decades of research (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010), proposes that reminding people of their own mortality should increase the concern for maintaining worldview faith (worldview defense) and self-worth. In a series of studies assessing the mortality salience hypothesis, Rosenblatt and colleagues (1989) compared responses to moral transgression in experienced judges who were asked to reflect on their own death (inducing mortality salience) with judges who had not had mortality salience induced. Moral transgression was presented using a vignette wherein participants were asked to set a bond for a charge of prostitution. The authors predicted that individuals in the mortality salience manipulation would judge the moral transgression of prostitution harsher than participants in the control condition and would therefore set a higher bond. Rosenblatt and colleagues (1989) argued that because people use cultural worldviews to ameliorate thoughts of death, the presence of death thoughts would prompt harsher responses towards moral transgression—an action indicative of worldview defense. Their results confirmed the hypothesis: judges in the mortality salience manipulation set a bond that was substantially higher than those set by judges in the control condition—\$455 compared to \$50. The same study found similar results in a sample of college students but with the addition of an indicator of attitudes towards prostitution. Students set higher bonds for prostitution in the mortality salience condition and when students' beliefs were in moral opposition to prostitution. Thus, mortality

salience may increase the need for worldview defenses inasmuch that participants developed more negative evaluations of moral transgressors as a way of bolstering their own worldview beliefs.

Additional research by Harmon-Jones et al., (1997) used a series of studies with undergraduates to explore the function of self-esteem in regulating mortality salience and worldview defense. They hypothesized that higher self-esteem, both manipulated and dispositional, would weaken the effects of mortality salience, therefore reducing the need for worldview defense. Experiment 1 and 2 confirmed the relationship between self-esteem and mortality salience: individuals with high self-esteem did not rely on worldview defenses in response to mortality salience, while individuals with lower self-esteem did rely on such defenses. Further, Experiment 3 evidenced the relationship between higher self-esteem and sustained suppression of death-related thoughts following mortality salience—individuals with no self-esteem manipulation showed increased accessibility of death related constructs whereas those in the increased self-esteem manipulation did not. Their findings showed that in addition to ameliorating general anxiety, self-esteem may also reduce the effects of death specific anxieties such as mortality salience.

Unfortunately there are few studies that address TMT and older adults, limiting the applicability of TMT in describing older individual's responses to death threat. Out of the 277 experiments analyzed in Burke and colleagues' (2010) two-decade review, 89% employed convenience samples of college-aged participants. Although the age of participants has ranged from 7 to 84 years, the mean age was 22 years; thus, TMT has not sufficiently been applied to older adults and their families. Nonetheless, one application of TMT to older people can be seen in Maxfield and colleagues' (2007) exploration of age-related differences in response to

mortality salience. They sampled both undergraduates (aged 17-37) and older adults (aged 57-92) and found significant differences in the responses of younger people and older people experiencing induction of mortality salience. The undergraduates responded in accordance with previous research—they were harsher in their judgments of moral transgressors after experiencing mortality salience. The responses of the older adults were unique and contradicted the findings from previous TMT scholarship. Whereas younger people became slightly harsher in their judgments of moral transgressors, older people became more lenient in the mortality salience induction. Surprisingly, this study did not support the presumption that older people, being in closer proximity to death, would be more affected by the mortality salience manipulation than younger people. Rather, it showed that whereas mortality salience is more anxiety inducing for younger people (and elicited harsher responses to moral transgressors), older people may be less affected by such manipulations.

Indeed, research on death attitudes demonstrates that older people and younger people report differential responses to death. In a review of 49 studies addressing death anxiety in older adults, Fortner and Neimeyer (1999) found that death anxiety stabilizes around age 60 and remains stable throughout old age. Fortner and Neimeyer also reported that older adults had lower death anxiety than middle-aged adults. Taken together, results from TMT studies utilizing samples of older people as well as studies addressing death anxiety indicate that older adults experience and respond to thoughts of death in ways that are not supported by research with younger people. Thus, based on the existing research, the question remains: Why do older people tend to accept loss more easily or perceive death as less threatening than younger people, as is suggested by the TMT and death anxiety literature?

Several propositions have been offered to answer this question. In their study of

undergraduates' and older adults' responses to mortality salience, Maxfield and colleagues (2007) proposed that age-related differences are due to older persons' level of acclimation to loss and thoughts of death. This suggests that as people age and loss becomes a more normative aspect of growing older, individuals may become less reactive or respond less vigorously to mortality salience. Similarly, theorists might argue that cumulative experiences lead to cumulative advantages at the end of life, wherein older people are able to respond more favorably towards otherwise unfavorable circumstances or experiences. Another explanation, offered by Fung (2013), argued that older people are more reliant on individual worldview beliefs rather than social worldview beliefs, and because these individual belief systems rely on cumulative life experiences and allow for individual expression of beliefs, they more aptly provide older adults with assimilative worldview defense mechanisms. Accounting for the influence of life experiences in contributing to late life outcomes, each of these propositions addresses a major limitation of TMT—it does not consider lifespan influences. At a general level, younger people will likely have fewer impactful experiences than older people. These life experiences may well contribute to the tenacity of older people in confronting end of life issues such as death threat.

In the sections ahead, I present several concepts that are useful in advancing TMT to include lifespan experiences. I will start with an outline of Baltes' (1987) lifespan developmental perspective. From there, I will address changes in social validation and value-laden beliefs that may accompany change over time. As an example of cultural worldviews, I will then present research on religion and spirituality to demonstrate the impact of incorporating experiences with belief systems. The following three sections include growth from adversity, resilience, and hardiness, which can occur in response to significant lifespan events. Finally, I will present

research on wisdom, which provides a framework for understanding a lifespan approach to human strengths.

### **Additional Areas of Research**

#### **Lifespan Development**

Baltes' (1987) lifespan theory explores adaptation to gains and losses across an individual's development. Accordingly, lifespan theorists argue that ontogenetic development occurs across an individual's entire life, with no period holding supremacy. As such, old age can be as fruitful for individual development as earlier stages, such as adolescence and early adulthood. Timing, direction, and order are also important aspects of Baltes' theory, representing the influences of cultural norms in determining when changes should occur, in what direction, and in what order. Additionally, development is believed to be multidirectional and multidimensional; that is, the considerable plurality of changes across development varies according to domain and developmental period. While some domains may experience increases in functioning in old age, such as an increase in the ability to manage losses, others may experience decreases, such as in physical functioning. The multidirectionality of lifespan development well illustrates the belief that individual change is characterized by simultaneous gains and losses. Whereas old age has been typically depicted as a time of loss and despair, lifespan theorists argue that gains occur despite, and even in response to, age graded declines. Thus, aging presents a unique opportunity for growth amidst decline. Baltes further recognized the concept of plasticity, which refers to an individual's potential for growth and may be contingent upon individual lifespan experiences. These life experiences or conditions may be influenced by sociocultural factors occurring in a given period, thus extending lifespan development to include the historical embeddedness of individual change. Consistent with this

perspective is the importance of context when studying developmental change, taking into account age-graded influences, history-graded influences, and nonnormative influences. Finally, Baltes viewed the field of human development as interdisciplinary, which is important for cultivating an understanding of the complexity of individual experience within families, groups, and cultures.

Emphasizing the influence of gains and losses across development, lifespan theory illustrates how individuals may experience adversity, with one outcome being positive responses to loss such as adaptations in old age. The experience of adversity and potential adaptations may incite changes in worldview beliefs. People who have experience with adversity may be able to integrate such experiences into their worldview practices, thus providing a catalyst for more responsive worldviews. While some scholars have conceptualized changing social roles as potentially adverse experiences (Minkler & Holstein, 2008), lifespan theories such as selective optimization with compensation (SOC; Baltes, 1997) and socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, Issacowitz, & Charles, 1999) emphasize the impact of changing social goals, and values therein, which may influence perceptions of and responses to future time. For example, leaving employment may encourage a redefinition of values, as the aging person may no longer depend on societal values of productivity engendered in traditional employment, thus undermining a system of meaning wherein the older person previously derived self-esteem. Because traditional values of productivity may not be heralded as valuable developmental tasks in old age, especially into later adulthood when there may be a shift towards fewer gains and more losses, older people may rely on individualized conceptions of self and values rather than on external forms of social validation. Terror management theorists have explored this phenomenon with particular care to articulate the benefits of changing forms of social validation

(McCoy, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2000). McCoy and colleagues (2000) argued that decreased concern for the social validation of societal values may occur simultaneously with life transitions such as retirement. Other potentially adverse experiences across the lifespan may include health declines such as frailty (Braudy Harris, 2008) or the loss of a spouse or older parent, signaling a transition into the omega role—the role of the oldest living family member (Bennett, 2010). These transitions are important in understanding older adults' experiences in later life because they are typically unique to older people. Accordingly, as people grow older, experience adversities across the life course, adapt to transitions, and perceive time as more limited, they may become capable of developing mechanisms with which to confront the end of life in ways that are not available to younger adults, possibly in the form of individualized worldviews.

### **Growth from Adversity**

An important theoretical consideration for understanding change that may be endemic to adaptation to adversity across the lifespan is the concept of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Posttraumatic growth supposes that experiencing significant stressors may present opportunities for growth and self-discovery. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) identified three areas of substantive research documenting occurrence of changes after trauma: changes in self-perception, changes in relationships, and changes in personal life philosophy. Changes in self-perception include emotional growth, feelings of self-reliance, and strength for future traumas. Further, traumatic events may lead to more intimate, self-disclosing relationships where individuals facing adversity may seek social support. Finally, existential growth may be possible through trauma. The struggle to cope with loss and make meaning through suffering can present unique challenges to spiritual belief systems.



Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) conception of posttraumatic growth is one in which trauma is defined by crisis and not necessarily ordinary stressors. However, Aldwin and Levenson (2004) argued that positive experiences and developmental life events may also have the potential to promote growth. An example of such growth is peak experiences and feelings of interconnectedness, transcendence, and closeness to God as described by Maslow (1970). Experiences are understood within the meaning making mechanisms of worldview beliefs. Thus, heightened religious experiences may emerge from integrating positive and negative life experiences into worldview beliefs through meaning making. This strength through spiritual development approach calls individuals to make meaning through lived experiences, a process redolent of the individualization of worldviews.

### **Religion and Spirituality**

As a mechanism for understanding the ways in which people grow in the face of adversity across the lifespan, religion and spirituality offer an understanding of human experience through which meaning making can occur over time, losses are reframed, and relationships are established within the contexts of worldview beliefs. Meaning making is the process wherein religion is used as a defense against mortality salience; it is the search for meaning amidst loss and death (Hui & Coleman, 2012). Endemic to this meaning making are theodicies, which are religious schemas that provide an understanding of living and dying (Berger, 1967). Additionally, Park and Folkman (1997) asserted that meaning making is especially prevalent among individuals who are facing trauma and death. As religion provides for a worldview in which order is inferred, meaning making gives reason to living, dying, and suffering. According to Pargament (1997), meaning making within the purview of religion and spirituality helps individuals to cope with difficult stressors and lifespan adversities.

Scholars often differentiate between expressions of external religiosity and internal religiosity or spirituality, with the former referring to a framework that orients religious belief and the latter referring to more integrative, individualized religious experience. As such, spirituality and intrinsic religiosity can be understood as the placement of spiritual experience at the center of one's life and may be guided by individual experiences and beliefs about the world. It is "an inner, subjective region of life that resolves around individual experiences of being, transcending the personal self, and connecting with the sacred" (Atchley, 2008, p.12). Conversely, extrinsic religiosity may be guided by external influences, and, thus, may reflect a more utilitarian attitude towards religious experiences (Bivens, Neimeyer, Kirchberg, & Moore, 1995). Rigdon and Epting (1985) supported this differentiation, reporting that deeper religious commitment abates death fear better than more religious practice. Further research (Bivens, Neimeyer, Kirchberg, & Moore, 1995) found that lower death threat was associated with intrinsic religiosity, whereas extrinsic religiosity did not produce the same association. Ramsey (2012) claimed that spirituality is a personal quest that bolsters resilience among older adults who "appear to have found wisdom and comfort in retaining a critical, almost outsider status" (p.133), as opposed to unquestioningly adhering to the beliefs of a communally-driven faith tradition. Rather, older people who are more spiritual may have individualized worldview beliefs that reflect their own lifespan experiences with adversity (e.g., posttraumatic growth). The integration of personal histories with worldview beliefs may forge belief systems that are experiential rather than passively accepted and may better bolster worldviews that support resilience in old age.

### **Resilience and Hardiness**

Important in understanding the utility of individualized worldviews is the concept of

resilience. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) defined resiliency as a “bouncing back factor” and purported that resiliency is “the ability to survive and even to transcend adversity” (p.16). Masten and Wright (2010) proposed that protective systems such as worldview beliefs support protective factors such as resilience across the lifespan. Resilience may be manifested as transformation after trauma and adversity, particularly for individuals who use religious schemas to make meaning of suffering. In a multiyear longitudinal study, Seery, Holman, and Silver (2010) explored the effects of cumulative lifetime adversity on mental health and well being outcomes, finding that persons with a history of some lifetime adversity reported lower distress, fewer posttraumatic stress symptoms, and higher life satisfaction than both those with no history of lifetime adversity and those with high history of adversity. Seery and colleagues also found that individuals with some lifetime adversity responded more positively to recent interactions with adversity. These findings support the conclusion that individuals who are able to cope with moderate adversity across the lifespan may be better equipped to confront loss later in life through already cultivated social and psychological resources.

Similarly, hardiness is a concept that is useful in understanding the influence of resilience from adversity on subsequent responses to stressors (Bonanno, 2004; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982). Kobasa and colleagues (Kobasa et al., 1982) used a prospective design to study the impact of hardiness on experiences with stressful life events and subsequent health outcomes in a sample of adults aged 32 to 65 years. Their findings supported the proposition that hardiness functions as a resistance resource through the personality dispositions of commitment, control, and challenge. In general, commitment refers to approach acceptance of adverse events rather than avoidance, control is the belief that one has influence over life events, and challenge is the perception that change, rather than continuity or stability, can lead to growth from both positive

and negative experiences (Bonanno, 2004; Kobasa et al., 1982). In a meta-analysis of 180 hardiness studies, Eschleman, Bowling, and Alarcon (2010) explored 30 years of relevant literature, indicating the substantive impact of hardiness on understanding stress and resilience. Concluding that hardiness is consistently associated with stress amelioration, they observed that personality dispositions, active coping, and social support reflect an inclination for hardy persons to seek resources needed to handle stressors if those resources are not already predisposed. Bonanno (2004) utilized hardiness in exploring pathways to resilience and found that hardy individuals appraise adversity and stressors as less intimidating, thus eliciting less distress.

With its conceptual dependence on life experiences and adversity such as stressors and strains, hardiness offers a useful explanatory mechanism through which both positive and negative life experiences may be incorporated into a positive view of old age. For example, individuals who exhibit commitment may utilize worldview beliefs to find meaning through adversity. This meaning may be especially important for older persons who are negotiating gains and losses. Further, control may contribute to feelings of self-worth and increased self-esteem, which aid in buffering against the effects of mortality salience. Finally, the concept of challenge embraces the myriad pathways to successful aging in conceptualizing change and transitions as normative aspects of lifespan development. Kobasa and colleagues (Kobasa et al., 1982) argued that challenge may lead to “attempts to transform oneself and thereby grow rather than conserve and protect what one can of the former existence” (p.170). Older people may become resilient through posttraumatic growth while also being protected from future trauma by way of hardiness.

The protection hardiness affords may well bolster resilient older people against recent stressors (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010), as well as anticipated stressors such as one’s own

death. This approach, emphasizing the influence of past experiences on future adversities, is consistent with posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and informs the findings of scholarship on TMT, purporting older persons' differential responses to the prospect of death as compared to those of younger participants (Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999; Maxfield et al., 2007).

### **The Cumulative Advantage of Old Age**

#### **Wisdom**

Smith and Baltes' (1990) conception of wisdom is defined as an end state, or rather a *becoming* state, towards which individuals progress across the lifespan. They argued that wisdom is knowledge "about the fundamental pragmatics of life" (p. 495), rather than a personality characteristic or a combination of personality qualities. At a basic level, wisdom-related expertise consists of rich factual knowledge and rich procedural knowledge. Together, these first two criteria reflect knowledge about life, its variations, and strategies of judgment, which may inform advice about life matters. The second level of wisdom-related expertise, which is more specific to the wisdom literature, consists of three additional criteria—lifespan contextualism, value relativism, and recognition and management of uncertainty. These last three are unique to the fundamental pragmatics of life and are believed to develop subsequent to the first two. Lifespan contextualism is knowledge about the many contexts of lives such as family, work, and society, and also considers the interrelatedness of lives, cultural diversity, and lifespan temporality. Value relativism is not only knowledge of, but also a tolerance for, individual, cultural, and societal variability. Finally, knowledge about the recognition and management of uncertainty concerns the indeterminate nature of life, an acceptance of its unpredictability, and the ways in which individuals respond to such uncertainties.

Smith and Baltes (1990) studied a sample of 20 young adults (aged 25-35 years), 20

middle-aged adults (aged 40-50 years), and 20 older adults (aged 60-81 years) with the purpose of testing their theoretical framework. They used four life-planning problems: one normative and one nonnormative life decision task targeted at both the young adult age group and the older adult age group (the middle age group was added after the development of the tasks). The results showed that the older adult group produced an equal share of the top performers identified in this study. Smith and Baltes (1990) argued that this finding is distinct from older adults' performance on tasks assessing other forms of intelligence (fluid or mechanical) that are not wisdom-based, purporting that "older adults definitely are not in the top range when expertlike performance in the mechanical aspects of memory are studied" (p. 502). That older adults are represented equally in wisdom-based knowledge tasks may suggest the importance of life experiences in bolstering strength, or wisdom-like gains, in old age.

Nevertheless, additional results from Smith and Baltes' (1990) study found age-cohort differences that were only marginally significant. Older adults rated lower on the life planning problems than young and middle-aged adults for three of the four scenarios. Although there were no age differences for the old-nonnormative scenario, older adults rated highest on this problem than on any of the other three, and young adults rated significantly lower than their own performances on the other three problems. Smith and Baltes expand on this finding by suggesting that each age group may display more knowledge for events or decisions that are specific to the age group to which they are members. Thus, knowledge and expertise may be based on the demands of a person's everyday life and may well be contingent upon past and current experiences.

The Smith and Baltes study, however, is not without limitations. For example, the scenarios used for each task focused on the topic of work and family. Indeed, the topic of work

may not represent a current or pressing demand for the group of older adults, especially those in the later part of life. Further, as Smith and Baltes (1990) noted, sampling based on criterion groups for which individuals may be nominated for knowledge of fundamental pragmatics of life may be a more useful method for studying wisdom, as theorists have argued that wisdom may be a relatively rare occurrence in the general population.

With these considerations in mind, Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, and Smith (1995) developed an additional study utilizing a sample of individuals who were nominated as wise. The wisdom nominees for their study were 14 participants (aged 41-79 years,  $M = 64$  years) nominated by nonpsychologists in an attempt to explore nonclinical conceptions of wise persons (i.e., How relevant is the concept of wisdom beyond the field of psychology?). Conversely, the comparison groups consisted of 20 young adult professionals (aged 25-35 years,  $M = 29$  years), 20 older adult professionals (aged 60-80 years,  $M = 68$  years), and 15 older clinical psychologists (aged 60-76 years,  $M = 65$  years). Based on previous work, the latter group of psychologists was presumed to perform well in this study because of training and practice that may engender wisdom-oriented dispositions. However, Baltes and colleagues (1995) proposed that while the clinical psychologists may perform well on life planning tasks, performance on the core domain of wisdom – fundamental pragmatics of life – would be better for the wisdom nominees. To address this assumption, and the limitation from previous studies that argued for more age- and experience-relevant scenarios (Smith & Baltes, 1990), they included an additional task that more explicitly focused on wisdom as being existential-related. Whereas the first task was the original life planning task from prior studies, the existential life management task utilized a vignette involving the threat of suicide by a friend, asking participants to consider what they would do and how they would respond. Baltes and colleagues (1995) explained, “The understanding and

management of existential issues such as death and suffering are at the core of wisdom” (p. 157). Indeed, the results indicated that wisdom nominees not only performed as well as the clinical psychologists on the life planning task, but they also showed the best performances on the existential life management task when compared to the control group.

These studies support the occurrence of wisdom in old age as a form of knowledge that is based on lifespan experiences. Further, Baltes and Smith (2008) asserted, each phase of the lifespan presents unique challenges and opportunities that foster wisdom-related knowledge. As such, older people have more exposure to developmental tasks and lifespan events that may contribute to development towards *becoming* wise. Nevertheless, old age is not a sufficient condition for developing wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Freund, 2003; Baltes & Smith, 2008). Other factors that contribute to knowledge about the fundamental pragmatics of life include “openness to experience, generativity, cognitive style, contact with excellent mentors, and some exposure to structured and critical life experiences” (Baltes & Smith, 2008; p. 60). Thus, the cumulative advantage of old age seems to be not in cognitive or physical functioning, but in wisdom-based knowledge that is learned and earned through lifespan experiences and may aid in the abatement of existential threats.

### **The Present Study**

In an attempt to develop an understanding of the influence of life experiences on later life stressors, I utilized a lifespan perspective to inform research on TMT. With TMT scholars still questioning the nature of older persons’ differential responses to mortality salience inductions in experimental designs, there is a dearth of research seeking to explain why older people may be less threatened by the prospect of death than younger people. Although I acknowledge that responses to death-related thoughts and experiences are not resoundingly positive, the present



research primarily focused on older people who were bolstered by age, experiences, and exceptional faith that, according to this model of development, could defend against late-life stressors such as death threat. Accordingly, I believe that lifespan experiences with adversity influence and are influenced by worldview beliefs, which may become more individualized with age and can promote growth, resilience, and hardiness. Older people who are able to grow from stressful experiences, who make meaning through personalized expressions of faith, and who show strength when confronted with existential dilemmas may indeed be considered as persons who are *becoming* wise.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand how older men and women with strong religious worldviews reflected on lifespan experiences with adversity. It explored the role of adversity in contributing to an individualization of worldview beliefs, how these beliefs and experiences may influence perceptions of death, and how older people make meaning of traumatic life experiences. This chapter provides the methods with which I answered the following research questions:

1. What is the role of lifespan experiences in the development of individualized worldviews?
2. How are experiences with adversity integrated into worldview belief systems?
3. How do older people with strong religious worldviews reflect on the prospect of death?

#### **Methodological Paradigm**

A content analysis approach to qualitative inquiry is a flexible method for interpreting text data. In his book entitled *Basic Content Analysis*, Weber (1990) outlined eleven applications

of content analysis, purporting that the most common utilizations explore cultural patterns, reveal the focus of individuals and groups, and describe trends found in data. Although Weber's foundational work presents the myriad purposes of content analysis, from qualitative to quantitative as well as from inductive to deductive, the very breadth of its utilization lends ambiguity to procedural and definitional understandings therein. In an attempt to elucidate such limitations, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explored the content analysis scholarship and described three main approaches: summative, conventional, and directed. The present study implemented the latter of these in examining the transcripts of spiritual nominees.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). They distinguished between summative, conventional, and directed analyses by emphasizing the role of a theoretical framework or theory. Like grounded theory methods (GTM; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the conventional approach is based on observation and is utilized when there is no extant theory with which to explore the phenomena of interest. Similarly, summative content analysis focuses on the quantification of keywords and their usage rather than on exploring meaning, thus also forgoing theory in the development and identification of codes. Unlike summative and conventional analyses, the directed approach begins with theory and uses the analysis to refine and extend conceptually a theoretical framework. Thus, this method was appropriate for the present study.

Contrasting GTM which utilize an inductive approach to qualitative methodology, directed content analysis is deductive and uses theory to formulate the research questions, identify variables and sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002), and develop initial coding schemes

(Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Weber, 1990). In this way, theory is used to orient the researcher to the exploration of the data. The researcher may seek not only to identify instances of supporting evidence for theory application, but also instances of nonsupporting evidence, thus emboldening further theoretical refinement.

The ways in which directed content analysis applied to the present study are numerous. Content analyses are traditionally used to identify themes or patterns in data that already exist (Patton, 2002), which is suitable for a secondary analysis. Additionally, by using the directed approach, I sought to extend TMT to include a lifespan perspective. While some scholars may seek to generate new theory using GTM, I acknowledged the abundance of research supporting TMT and offered that a novel application of the theory may address gaps in the literature.

### **Definitions**

#### **Adversity**

Adversity is broadly defined to include changes in health functioning (Braudy Harris, 2008), changing social roles (Minkler & Holstein, 2008), loss of a spouse or parent (Bennett, 2010), or any traumatic or stressful experience that presents an opportunity for growth and self-discovery (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Although these examples were important for orienting the focus of the present study, they were not exhaustive. Indeed, the analysis produced other examples of experiences with adversity that were not anticipated and contributed to a more complete understanding of the range of lifespan experiences that contribute to strength in old age.

#### **Worldview**

TMT proponents assert that cultural worldviews are fundamentally religious in nature (Solomon et al., 1991). As such, faith traditions may be the most frequently studied examples of

worldview belief systems. The present study considered the Lutheran faith tradition to be an exemplar of such worldviews. However, I focused not on the Lutheran faith but on shared faith-based religious traditions among participants to control for excess variability in belief. With the use of spiritual nominees who identified themselves as Lutheran, the analysis explored lifespan experiences in relation to the participant's shared faith tradition. Instances of spiritual strength and struggle were analyzed for the purpose of understanding how spiritual belief systems were perceived as becoming more robustly experienced, and thus more individualized.

### **Death Perceptions**

The plurality of possible perceptions of death is well studied in the end-of-life literature. They may range from death avoidance and death fear or anxiety to death acceptance, also known as approach acceptance. In the present study, I adopted an open understanding of the possible ways in which death may be viewed and experienced. Both reflections on past experiences with death as well as beliefs and feelings about the prospect of future death were sought.

### **Design of the Study**

#### **Sampling and Recruitment**

A secondary qualitative data analysis was used in this study. In a research project conducted in 1994-1995 and 2002 by Janet L. Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, 16 spiritual nominees provided narratives "In order to understand the ways in which [older adults] have been empowered by their religious faith to survive losses and crises in their lives..." (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; p. 11). The recruitment of these spiritual nominees, redolent of Baltes and colleagues' (1995) utilization of wisdom nominees, was both purposeful and theoretical (Patton, 2002; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Similarly, the decision to utilize the experiences of these older people in the present study, too, has theoretical and purposive

underpinnings. Patton (2002) offered that purposeful sampling is a method with which information-rich cases are selected based on individuals' capacity for providing salient data. Additionally, Marshall and Rossman (2011) reported that theory-based sampling "finds examples of a theoretical construct and thereby elaborates and examines it" (p.111). Although this differs somewhat from those elaborations of theoretical sampling offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006), positing that theoretical sampling is emergent and foundational to grounded theory methods, the focus for the present study was not on the development of new theory. Rather, the present study was purposive in the selection of older participants with strong religious worldview beliefs and shares with TMT an emphasis on death and, with developmental theorists, an emphasis on lifespan experiences.

The analytic sample of the present study was composed of all 16 spiritual nominees from the original data collection. The participants were American and German men and women identifying with the same life-long faith tradition over the age of 65 years. Their pseudonyms and demographic information can be found in Table 1. The American women were recruited from southwest Virginia and the American men from Minneapolis-St. Paul and vicinity. Conversely, the German women were recruited from Wilster, northwest Germany and the German men from Göttingen, central Germany. Although the original studies by Ramsey and Blieszner (1999, 2012) used a cross-cultural analysis to explore differences and similarities in the experiences of these older people, I did not anticipate theoretical differences in the analyses of individuals from each country. Nonetheless, I recognized, along with lifespan theorists, the sociohistorical embeddedness of individual change and was open to any differences therein.

Participant recruitment comprised a two-part selection process. Potential participants first attended focus groups where the researchers led discussions and observed the participants. Next,

the investigators selected individuals from the focus groups who were particularly articulate about their faith during the discussions and also consulted with their pastors, asking, “To whom would you go, among these [men or women], if you yourself needed spiritual guidance?” This selection process produced eight Americans, of which four were male and four were female, and eight Germans with an equal composition of males and females.

### **Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

In order to determine the applicability of a secondary dataset for use in the present study, I sought the following criteria: (1) older men and women over the age of 65 years, (2) well-developed worldview beliefs, (3) retrospective in-depth interviews during which participants recounted experiences with adversity, trauma, and death, and (4) reflections on the prospect of one’s own death. All of these criteria were met in the data collected by Ramsey and Blieszner (1999, 2012).

To qualify as a participant in Ramsey and Blieszner’s (1999, 2012) original studies, and thus for the present study as well, participants must have met the following criteria: (1) be 65 years of age or older, (2) identify as having lifelong membership in a shared faith tradition, (3) exhibit depth of spiritual maturity, and (4) be willing to participate in a lengthy interviews. Advanced education and verbal acuity were not requirements for inclusion.

### **Human Subjects Protection**

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for the present study was approved (IRB #15-056) and can be found in Appendix A. Due to the nature of the study—that of a secondary data analysis of deidentified data—an exempt approval was granted.

### **Data Collection**

The original data collection involved focus groups, in-depth interviews, field notes, and

personal journals. During the focus-group phase of the participant selection process, American and German men met in church meeting rooms, while the American women met in their church basement and the German women in their parish house. The locations allowed for a familiar environment in which to facilitate comfort and conveyed the religious subject matter of the discussions. Each group meeting lasted for one hour and was tape-recorded to capture participant conversations for later analysis. These conversations focused on the topic of spiritual coping with lifespan challenges, asking questions such as: Which person in the Bible do you like best and why? Do you believe that faith helped this person to overcome problems in life? How and why? How has faith helped you with your difficulties? How has participation in the church changed your life? Imagine that after your death you will be made a saint, what would you like to be the reason? How do you imagine saints are? These focus groups were used to generate a smaller group of spiritual nominees, with which in-depth interviews were later completed.

The in-depth interviews lasted 1 to 2.5 hours for the initial meeting, with second and third interviews of a similar length being repeated until data saturation was reached. The interviews were held in all but one participant's home and were tape-recorded for transcription. Using Charmaz's (2006) open-ended grounded theory interview techniques, the topics discussed were emergent, with participants "easily set[ting] the discussion agenda" (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; p. 40-41). The interviews began with simple orienting questions used to relax the participants and set the tone for the remainder of the interview, which later focused on the significance of spirituality in their lives. Questions focused on memorable life events, the participant's relationship with God, important persons in the participant's spiritual life, important Christian teachings, and questions about personal renewal. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) reported, "They were remarkably open in relating intimate life experiences" (p. 41), indicating a willingness to

divulge a breadth of lifespan experiences. A complete list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Personal journals and field notes contributed to method triangulation (taken together with focus groups and interviews) as additional sources of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), which served the purposes of the original study. However, in the present study I focused only on the in-depth interviews as the primary source of data. There are a few reasons for this. First, the present study was not concerned with contesting the selection of spiritual nominees, thus eliminating the need for data from the focus groups. Second, the personal journal created by Ramsey, who conducted the interviews, informed the in-depth interview process and ensured interviewer objectivity. Although valuable to the original study and subsequent publications, the personal journal did not contribute to the analyses of the present study. The final reason is logistical—the sixteen in-depth interviews were extensive in length and content, therefore requiring considerable time and effort to review. Thus, I focused on what I believe to be the most content-rich source of data in the present study, which were the in-depth interviews.

### **Data Handling Procedures**

The interviews with the American spiritual nominees were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews with the German participants were tape-recorded and transcribed in German before being translated into English. A copy of the transcripts was digitally stored on my computer and was password protected. Further, during the original data collection process, pseudonyms were chosen for each participant, thus assuring anonymity. Transcript files were labeled by each participant's pseudonym and I did not have access to any identifying information.

### **Data Analysis**



In an attempt to achieve an immersion in the data, the analysis began with a reading of all 16 transcripts three times prior to the inception of coding. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) outlined three phases of coding for directed content analysis that guided the present study and were used in conjunction with whole text analysis as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The first phase involved reading the transcript and highlighting all instances of the phenomenon of interest. Hsieh and Shannon argued that this first phase increases trustworthiness by avoiding the imposition of theoretically predetermined codes, which are applied during the second phase. The second part of the coding process involved coding according to the predetermined codes, thus guiding a *directed* analysis of the data. The last part of the coding process consisted of developing new codes for any theoretically relevant text that could not be categorized using the initial coding scheme. While the first two phases were useful in identifying all theoretically pertinent instances of a phenomenon within a text, the third phase allowed for the emergence of both common and discrepant themes.

The a priori, theory-generated codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) guiding the second phase of analysis may be subsumed under the categories adversity, death perceptions, and worldview. Rather than using physical units of analysis such as a word, sentence, or paragraph, coding units consisted of passages that represented complete expressions of an idea or experience. Thus, codes consisted of units as small as words and as large as paragraphs. A full list of codes generated during the present study can be found in Appendix C.

Throughout the analytic process, I recorded thematic, theoretical, and methodological memos that included reflections, notes, thoughts, and insights for the purpose of “[moving] the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; p. 213). I used ATLAS.ti for Mac for the data coding as well as to record notes and memos during the data

analysis process.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness describes the soundness of qualitative research and is likened to quantitative approaches to reliability and validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In response to the growing array of typologies and methods with which qualitative inquiry may be assessed, Creswell and Miller (2000) developed a list of common procedures used to ensure the rigor of qualitative study. Specifically, I engaged in triangulation, search for disconfirming evidence, reflexivity, development of an audit trail, and peer debriefing.

***Triangulation.*** Creswell and Miller (2000) described triangulation as a validity procedure with which multiple perspectives and sources of data converge to inform categories and themes within a study. Triangulation allows researchers to establish validity through multiple forms of evidence, of which there are four: triangulation through data sources, theories, methods, and multiple investigators (Denzin, 1978). I engaged in triangulation using the first two of these—data sources and theories. Sources of data included participants' experiences (e.g., transcripts) as well as data generated throughout the research process, such as my reflections, memos, and personal notes. My memos and notes helped me organize the analysis and clarify my interpretation of the participants' experiences in relation to the guiding theories. Additionally, with use of multiple theoretical perspectives, namely TMT and lifespan developmental theory, theory triangulation was achieved. Whereas TMT focuses on the present experience of mortality salience and worldview beliefs, a lifespan approach utilizes changes (gains and losses) across development, which helped advance a multidimensional rather than unidimensional understanding of TMT.

***Disconfirming evidence.*** Searching for disconfirming evidence involves scrutinizing the

data for discrepant themes. Whereas the first and second phase of the data analysis employed TMT and lifespan lenses to uncover theoretically-driven themes, the third phase, wherein I sought disconfirming codes, challenged any proclivity for confirmation-seeking. Disconfirming evidence supports the notion of the multiplicity and complexity of realities and lived experiences. As such, qualitative research findings are more credible when they seek to identify the diversity of possible narratives.

***Reflexivity.*** Reflexivity is the practice of disclosing assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000) on part of the researcher. This method allows readers to understand the positionality of the researcher and to understand the lens through which inquiry is conducted. I acknowledged the presence of subjectivity and attempted to suspend any assumptions and biases. Included in the end of this section is a statement of subjectivity wherein I explore my beliefs and experiences relevant to the present study.

***Audit trail.*** The audit trail is a process by which researchers establish credibility of the progression of the narrative (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This method utilizes individuals who are external to the project to “examine both the process and product of the inquiry, and determine the trustworthiness of the findings” (p. 128). An audit trail may include memos, researcher journals, an activity log, and recordings of the data analysis procedures. I utilized a DropBox document, shared between me and my advisor, that contained (1) brief summaries of each transcript after the first, second, and third readings and (2) a record of notes, memos, and activities specific to the data analysis process. These documents can be found in Appendix D.1 and Appendix D.2. An additional form of auditing will be the review of this completed study by my advisory committee members.

***Peer debriefing.*** The final procedure to establish trustworthiness was a peer review, or

debriefing, of the process of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The role of peer reviewer is often fulfilled by someone who has knowledge of the research area, is willing to challenge the researcher's assumptions, and can offer critical responses to methodological decisions and interpretations. This collaborative relationship between researcher and reviewer results in feedback that can aid in lending credibility to a study. The peer reviewer for the present study was a female graduate student who recently received a master's degree in human development and possesses extensive knowledge regarding religion and spirituality across the lifespan. Her feedback was primarily conceptual and theoretical; examples include suggestions to subsume hardiness under spiritual resiliency, place more emphasis on the disparities between Americans and Germans due to their unique cultural and political environments, and elaborate the differences between spirituality and religiosity. She received a \$20 gift card for her collaboration throughout the study.

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

Religion has always been an important aspect of my personal and family life. I was born into a Pentecostal family with two uncles who served as preachers. My immediate family left the church at the time of my mother and father's divorce, leaving my mother, brother, and myself to explore other faith traditions such as Baptist, Methodist, and nondenominational. When I was 15, my father and stepmother introduced me to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), wherein I first deeply and truly explored my own beliefs and values. I became immersed in the LDS church, became baptized, accepted a calling among the priesthood, and served as first assistant to the president. My own developmental trajectory would have echoed that of every other Mormon male's had I attended a traditionally LDS institution and accepted my calling to leave on a two-year mission. However, it did not. I attended another institution to pursue my

undergraduate degree, one in which a myriad of faith traditions, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories contributed to an understanding of religious experience as existing on a spectrum, rather than on a plane.

My undergraduate education offered other developmental opportunities that contributed to my spiritual maturation. It was at this time that I experienced the culmination of my struggle with my sexual identity. I was challenged to negotiate two seemingly antithetical identities: one as a gay man and the other as a follower of Christ. Guided by my knowledge of historical psychology and philosophers such as Friederich Nietzsche, my abdication of traditional religious beliefs allowed for an acceptance of my gay identity, but unfortunately contributed to a diminished view of religiosity.

This utilitarian view was intensely, albeit silently, challenged by my service within the community. I worked with a group of older people, many of which were low-income, in a non-profit adult day health (ADH) program. I conducted focus groups that explored the topic of religion, spirituality, God, families, and resilience. The personal accounts of these men and women revealed the perceived value and very real strength that accompanied religious belief. They demonstrated perseverance and often cited God as their source of fortitude in times of loss. Indeed, I was faced with the reality of God and religion in the experiences of these older people. My understanding of religious practice, although utilitarian, could not deny the lived religious experiences that were fervently attested to me at each meeting.

My own experiences with religion, aging, and identity have led to a complex understanding of the role of religion among individuals and families. Although religion does not play an integral role in my own life, I recognize its value to the many people who use it to explore meaning within their own worldviews. I also believe that values are relative, unique, and

contingent upon the experiences that shape them. As such, spiritual diversity should be embraced rather than challenged.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Secondary Data**

There are several challenges associated with conducting a secondary analysis of qualitative data. Hinds, Vogel, and Clarke-Steffen (1997) suggested two principal methodological issues: (a) the degree to which it is possible to analyze the data secondarily and (b) the extent to which a secondary analysis of the data can conceptually and theoretically contribute to scholarship without invalidating the primary analysis. This first methodological consideration addresses selective sampling and missing data. Selective sampling of the data may result due to analytic factors or data management decisions. The present study, however, utilized all of the data gathered during the in-depth interview phase of the original investigation, thus avoiding selective sampling. I have also considered the second issue—contributing to the primary analysis without negating its efforts. For example, the focus of the original analysis was factors contributing to spiritual resiliency in old age. However, the goal of the present study was to extend TMT to consider, and possibly include, lifespan influences and exceptional responses to adversity such as hardiness, spiritual resilience, and wisdom. These concepts may interact to inform an analysis of responses to and conceptions of death. In this way, the present study acknowledged the presence of the original findings from the primary analysis and aimed to incorporate them into an enhanced understanding of adversity across the lifespan and subsequent experiences with end-of-life concerns.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of using secondary data are manifold. First, the data consisted of 16 in-depth interview transcripts of older Americans and Germans. It is unlikely I would have been able to secure such in-depth and lengthy interviews for a master's thesis.

Additionally, the cultural composition of the sample may not have been possible. Other benefits include the conservation of resources (i.e., time, money, and energy) due to not soliciting participants and gathering primary data.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS**

### **Overview of Findings**

The goal of the present study was to explore TMT within the purview of lifespan developmental theory. The research questions addressed the role of lifespan experiences in the individualization of religious worldviews, the integration of adversity into worldview beliefs, and the prospect of future death. With these questions in mind, the aim of the present study was not only to explore lifespan development using a TMT perspective, but also to uncover pathways to further theoretical development.

Overall, the results revealed ways in which experiences with adversity, including the death of a spouse, involvement in war, and changes in health functioning, contributed to deeper religious belief. Such changes in religious worldview manifested as the perception of a closer relationship with God, self-reported increased church attendance, and statements of beliefs about personal growth through faith-based practices. While death was a prevalent theme in the transcripts, there were no instances in which participants reflected on the prospect of their own mortality with fear, anxiety, or avoidance.

To further demonstrate how these themes – adversity, religious worldviews, and beliefs about self-death – interacted to inform and extend TMT, I will next present the narratives of two participants, Wilhem (male, German) and Rebecca (female, American). I believe that this illustration, focusing on within-person experiences across the lifespan, may provide a framework through which the relationships among themes interact to support the extension of TMT to

lifespan development. After presenting Wilhem's and Rebecca's stories, I will expand on the themes that emerged across participants.

### **Wilhem**

Wilhem described several experiences with adversity from his life. Beginning with his involvement in World War II, Wilhem reported on enacting his faith as a wartime doctor, experiences with death, and changes in his own physical health. He went into detail to explain his experience with prostate cancer:

So I prepared myself, with my wife, and I said...I wrote the Pastor who was to bury me, and my children. [I wrote] each of them a letter. I said goodbye, because, I said, "You must come to terms with the end, because the operation...is not fully understood, right?" That was, for me, a time of grace...So with full trust I went into the operation, without fear, without any fear at all, right, out of this inner support.

He also talked about a future time perspective that, influenced by religious worldview, contributed to less conscious concern for death:

Well I don't worry about my life at all, because I know that we [Christians] have a perspective, a future perspective [that comes] with age...How is it when one turns 90 or so and knows that only two years of life are left for him? We have this wonderful perspective of the future. That [death] does not worry me.

For Wilhem, his experience with adversity not only made salient the reality of his mortality, but also contributed to an increased sense of "inner support" that bolstered against death anxiety and fear.

### **Rebecca**

Rebecca also reflected upon her lifespan experiences with adversity, consisting of her role as caregiver for her paralyzed husband for 48 years, experiences with death, and her own declines in physical health:

They say I broke my hip...I was rushed to the hospital. Then I was recuperating from that and I was in a nursing home and I had a stroke on my left side. So this side is broken and this side's got a stroke on it. So that was in 1992. I've



recovered enough so that I can walk with my cane. I don't have any pain, I'm very fortunate that way. So, I guess I'm lucky.

Rebecca's depiction of her bodily ailments provides insight into ways in which adversity is experienced within the context of religious worldviews. Her cognitive reframing of potentially traumatic health decline suggests spiritual mechanisms, almost an inclination, for growth from adversity through spiritual worldviews. Rebecca's beliefs about God and death further reflect a tenacity for positivity through belief:

[About feeling independent in her own home] I feel like I'm lucky. I'm blessed I guess. I still believe in God, I believe in Jesus Christ the Lord. I know he is my Savior, and I'm ready to die, I think! When my time comes. I hope I'm ready.

This sort of religious coping is also apparent in Rebecca's belief about experiencing the death of others, "I know when there's a death, God is with me, yes. He comforts you." For Rebecca, worldview belief not only served to reframe trauma and losses, but also provided courage in facing the prospect of her own death. This pattern is redolent of spiritual resilience and speaks to Rebecca's deeper religious belief, which is indicative of an individualized religious worldview.

I believe that the experience of death and adversity, as both Rebecca and Wilhem reported, can foster the perception of a closer relationship with God and lead to a transformation in belief from the superficial and extrinsically oriented to the matured and intrinsic. Indeed, the life events and beliefs of the participants in this study revealed how lifespan development and experiences can lead to a change in belief that supported effectively coping with subsequent stressors. The following sections will focus on these themes.

I will begin with an analysis of lifespan adversities reported by the spiritual nominees in the study, focusing on the loss of close relationships, war, health decline, social role changes, and responses to such adversities. Next, I will present the self-reported changes in belief, self, and relationship with the sacred that were influenced by age and religious others. Finally, I will

address participants' views and feelings about their own deaths.

### **Themes: Adversity, Worldview Belief, and Death**

#### **Experiences with Adversity**

All participants experienced adversity in their lives, ranging from prolonged sickness in old age to the loss of a spouse or other close familial and social relationships. Of particular interest to the present study were the ways in which adversity was integrated into worldview beliefs, and the potential for experiences with adversity to influence religious worldviews.

*Death experiences and the loss of close relationships.* As an experience that may be normative and age-related, death across the lifespan was a prevalent topic among participants. Miriam, an American woman, reflected on the death of her father and brother who died just months apart. She reported that their deaths caused a nervous breakdown in her mother, for whom she ended up caring. In talking about her experience, Miriam said,

So we had it pretty hard, but I think with the help I had...I came through it with a lot of help from everybody and I knew the Lord was on my side...I came through it, and I feel like I've been enriched by it. It tried my patience, and it took my strength and I felt like every night, Lord am I going to be able to make it through another day.

Her reflection illustrates how adversity may be situated within the context of religious belief and provides insight into not only the impact of adversity on worldview beliefs—that of being enriched and strengthened—but also one way in which experiences with adversity might prompt a reflection on one's own mortality.

In the same way that Wilhem, Rebecca, and Miriam all believed that their religious worldviews offered comfort in times of crises, Lovey (female, American), too, used her belief to cope with the unexpected death of her husband:

I thought I was going to die too, because it looked like my heart was getting bigger and bigger and I thought it was going to burst out of my body...I hadn't thought to pray, I don't know why I hadn't thought to pray, so I turned around to

go back into the kitchen. When I got to the corner of the table there in the dining room, well it just came over me to pray. And when I said Dear Father, he knew I reckon what I was going to say, because it looked like the whole house just opened up like that, roof and all. He said to me “Don’t worry, you are in my arms.” You know it all went down, my heart went back to beating like it ought to, and it even wiped all the tears away. I couldn’t even cry.

Evident among these accounts with adversity is the experience of religious worldviews as strengthening. For some, this strength not only helped them cope with loss, but also led to the belief that experiences with death served as a second chance.

Emma was a German woman who experienced substantial financial hardship throughout her life, during her marriage, and after the death of her husband. When asked about a time at which she felt as though she received a second chance, she responded, “It came 100% after my husband’s death.” She continued to recount the aspects of her life that signified her second chance that came despite the loss of her partner, mostly focusing on facets of worldview belief:

So much has happened since my husband died, things that I could have never expected. I’ve been given so many things as presents – blouses and dresses and such things, I don’t have to buy them myself. I’ve simply gotten them as gifts from people who I assume can afford it. I wouldn’t go somewhere – but that’s also a present. I really thought – I told you yesterday – when my husband was dead, “now, things will go no further.” And now there have been so many relationships and small things, in which I’ve rejoiced and have said, “You see, he [God] did it again.”

Emma’s example demonstrates how adversity, within the framework of religious worldviews, can lead to a perception of change through the opportunity to “start over” both spiritually and interpersonally. Another German woman, Inge, reported on a similar experience, saying that her husband’s death was a chance to “begin again.”

One German man, Karl, did not turn to religious belief until faced with the death of his first wife. He talked about the impact that her death had on his role as a father, and the way in which he looked to faith in response to loss:

The experience that most shaped me was the early death of my wife. That shaped

me a lot. She died at the age of thirty-six. And I was a widower with two small children. From then on I really had it rough, with my children...And it [death] was such that it just about took me along with it, too! Then I thought, "Something just isn't right with your life somehow, something is missing! Something that you did must not be right." Then I thought about God!

The death of Karl's wife was quite literally the catalyst for his development of and involvement in religious-based practices. This is not to say that individuals who do not have experiences with adversity lack the means to develop religious worldviews; rather, this represents one pathway to religious worldview development.

**War.** War was another substantive source of adversity for these individuals. Despite most participants talking about war involvement or the effects of war in their lives, it most centrally affected German participants, especially World War II (WWII). Karl explained how his family home was mostly destroyed in a fire during the war, and how "nerve wracking" the swarms of American war planes flying overhead were. Destruction was not the only impact of war on these people's lives, however. Anna, another German woman, revealed:

I was penniless. The war brought the devaluation. The money was gone and there weren't any savings...Not only the people are dead, but the savings, too.

She believed that the experience of war, as an extreme instance of adversity, led to a unique perspective in old age:

When one gets older, one gets more critical and sees that one was lucky, to have gotten her husband back, to work again, to live, to have healthy kids, and that's important.

Anna's perspective was bolstered by her chronological development as well as her experiences with adversity. In this excerpt, it is unclear whether war contributed to her religious worldview. What is clear, however, is how her beliefs about an age-related perspective both informed and was informed by her experience with adversity.

Emma (female, German) reiterated the effects of war mentioned by both Karl and Anna.

She recounted the imprisonment of her father by Polish forces and the “bomb attacks” and “rapes” during those times. Emma believed that the war contributed to increased church attendance, saying, “The churches were full then! When the people realized, we’re at the end.” Emma’s claim that the influence of war led to increased church attendance (or religious worldview seeking behaviors) embeds religious worldview beliefs within a sociohistorical context and supports that further theoretical development of TMT is, indeed, necessary to understand the development and change of religious worldviews.

The centrality of mortality in the lives of these participants during times of war was pervasive. Hans (male, German) described his time in a military prison camp, being kept in confinement, and weighing only sixty pounds. Similarly, Werner reflected on his involvement in the war and its effects on his belief. He depicted this as a time of rebirth, reporting:

I am reborn...born a second time. And this is not a parable, but in the true sense of the word...A few days before the war ended, I was wounded and one day later I was buried...under a house crashing and [I] almost disappeared...I was cemented...couldn’t move anything...Two days, exactly 48 hours and I have to thank for my life of course our Lord is the first one, but also to the help of the two Russian soldiers who in time between had conquered the area and detected me...But I should say: the trust in God [that was in me] before, at no second disappeared. That was all I felt...I repeated sometimes, and then I lost my consciousness, “into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

**Health decline.** Health decline was another focus among participants’ experiences with adversity. Similar to experiences with war or the loss of a close relationship, decline in health functioning and prolonged sickness also increased the salience of mortality and reliance on religious worldview belief.

Participants described negative changes in their health as intensely emotional. Inge, a German woman, had shingles for eight weeks and described the pain, reporting:

Much, much pain. It was a very, very bad time. But I got over it. But I had to go through a lot. I cried and moaned. That was a very dark time for me.

Similarly, Elizabeth (female, German) suffered from a broken hip:

The first time I was in the hospital with my hip, I had such a nervous breakdown and thought, everything is over now, you can't begin again.

Despite Inge and Elizabeth enduring these physical ailments, they were able to overcome the “dark times.” Alex, an American man, described the changes in his health quite differently than these women. For him, the impact of changes in physical health persisted and influenced his ability to participate in faith-based practices:

...as I said some years ago I had a stroke, and my health is such that I just can't do what I used to do. I would like to be more active, especially with the church. There are so many things that I could do, but just can't handle it. And that really bothers me.

As Miriam (female, American) explained, and consistent with that which I have presented so far, participants often made meaning of adversity using schemas consistent with religious worldviews:

I've had several operations, but I'm still able to be up and about and go. I feel like I've been blessed.

***Social role changes.*** The present focus on social role changes comes from the TMT proposition that socially constructed systems of validation are inherent to the derivation of self-esteem. This self-esteem, in turn, should defend against death threat and abate the effects of mortality salience. If self-esteem is contingent upon adherence to social values, but older people are unable to adhere to social values heralded at phases earlier in life, then social role changes may indicate changing systems of social validation. Anna offered an illustration of such changes:

When one is old, you see things a little [differently]. When one is young you have to accomplish a lot. I was less patient then. That goes away when you're older. You don't have the work pressure.

Although social role changes were prevalent in the lives of these older people, they did not necessarily point to changing systems of validation or self-esteem, such as what Anna's

experience might suggest. Instead, participants typically did not directly reflect on social roles influencing an individualization of worldview beliefs. For Alex, his health deterioration led to changes in ability that limited his activity within the church. But rather than identifying new behaviors that would have served to bolster self-esteem, Alex simply reported that his limitations were bothersome. In contrast, Tom indicated ways in which he was able to extend his system of validation beyond retirement, a time at which social role changes might be present:

And that is what I miss sometimes in retirement although I try to keep up myself by reading a great deal and getting involved with people who are interested in issues. And so that in essence is what I have been doing during retirement, and a lot of volunteer work.

For Tom, retirement did not represent a complete redefinition of systems of values. Instead, retirement was an opportunity to uphold those same standards of value using maintenance behaviors that supported the continuation of his value system—that of productivity and continual learning.

*Responses to adversity.* Unlike the previous sections that presented the array of adversities reported by participants in this study, addressing how participants reported on their responses to experiences with adversity serves to connect trauma and crises with the potential for benefits, such as posttraumatic growth. This section illustrates positive outcomes from adversity. For example, Karl turned to religion, and experienced a shift in worldview faith, after the death of his wife. He further reported:

How do I come to trust or have faith? How do I get there?...I didn't get it. And then...my wife died, then I went beyond that, intensified. Intensified.

His experience with finding God through a changed worldview in response to adversity is, however, somewhat different than the experiences reported by others. For Emma, the death of her husband led to a realization of her faith. She explains:

I didn't actually really live with Jesus until after my husband died. It was through

this frantic bereavement, when I really let myself fall, that I really realized what one means by “I can’t fall deeper than in God’s hands.” And I experienced that. When one is so alone you really get that. “He leads you.” I really thought, “It won’t work.” But it did!...I have truly experienced a provident Father, who takes care of me.

The death of Emma’s husband did not necessarily lead to a sudden change in belief or worldview shift, as Karl’s account depicted. Rather, it led to more of a realization of God’s presence within the framework of her established worldview belief. She said, “...a person first has to be very low, before he realizes, oh yes [God is there].” As such, Emma responded to adversity with deeper religious belief; it was a moment of recognition of the presence of the transcendent in her life, and not so much of an outright shift in religious orientation. This nuanced deepening may provide insight into the ways in which individuals, using their preexisting worldview beliefs, move from the extrinsic to the intrinsic—a kind of religious worldview development. She said:

God has given me a chance to develop further [via the death of her husband]. I believe that I’ve developed a lot in the last four years. And without thinking, I haven’t become better, rather I have grown.

It is possible that experiences with adversity and death make salient the reality of one’s own death, thus prompting a change in worldview belief to address the then increased need for functioning worldview beliefs. This could represent one way in which beliefs change over time in response to lifespan experiences and lead to differential conceptions of death in later life.

While there were several examples of participants perceiving an increased spiritual awareness or closeness with God through instances of adversity, which will be expanded upon in the following sections, some participants reported that their traumatic experience was simply “...a very bad time, a very sad time” (e.g., Inge, in reference to the death of her infant child). However, it is important to consider Inge’s experience within the context of this interview. She described the loss of her infant child when asked about “events that stand out in your life.”



Although she offered no explicit connection between her experience losing her child and further development of religious belief, it is likely that her early experience with trauma did indeed impact her perception of loss within her worldview beliefs.

### **Change in Self, Change in Worldview**

For most of these older people, changes in self accompanied changes in worldview belief. These changes came both with age and experiences with trauma and adversity and supported a perceived closer relationship with God and the transcendent. Similarly, the presence of religion among families and other close relationships generally supported the development of religious worldviews. All of these factors are important in understanding how responses to and growth from adversity can lead to changes in religious worldviews that are bolstered by the presence of religious others and contribute to an internalized faith experience. This internalized worldview, then, offered a perspective that came with age and led to improved defenses against death-threat, as will be discussed in later sections.

*Change in belief and relationship with God.* As an extension of responses to adversity, participants reported a belief that their trauma led to a change in religious worldview. Inge explained how her religious commitment changed after the death of her husband:

Before I went every now and then to church, no regular churchgoer. Only when I felt I had the need to go to church. And now I'm always there, whenever the door is open.

Miriam's experience was similar to Inge's; she reported that her availability for faith-based practice was limited by her responsibility to her mother, and how that changed after her mother's death. Miriam was invited by another woman to start attending groups and services after her mother's death:

...she said if you'll go I'll go, so we'll just start going. So she and I started going to the circles and we've been going ever since.

Apart from experiences with death, participants also described changes in belief as growing and evolving. While talking about modeling his faith, Winston reflected on how it has changed during his life, saying, “Maybe [it] becomes more personal all the time.” Similarly, Hans described his changing belief as, “...evolving and increasing...and joy in belief and with what comes along with belief.” Tom’s experience echoed that of both Winston and Hans, reporting, “I think it [belief] has been one of education and growth throughout my life...”

In addition to changes in belief, participants also reported a change in relationship with God, becoming one they believed was more personal and internalized. Emma described how her present understanding of God was different than that of her past:

I really understand what Jesus is for us, I just grasped that in the last four years [since the death of her husband]. Before I always read the devotions and prayed,...but not the personal relationship. Only in the last four years.

Lovey also believed that her relationship with and understanding of God changed during the time since the passing of her husband. She reported:

You can’t explain what it was like, it was so great. So, ever since then I’ve felt like I’m in Jesus’ arms, so I’m not afraid of anything. If anything happens, it’s just going to happen anyway, and I know I’m in His arms. What could be any better?

There were also times at which participants expressed a belief that God felt closer. For many, this was during times of hardship and death. Rebecca stated that she knew God was closer when she was coping with death, Lovey reported that God was close when she felt “down and out,” and Miriam stated that God was close during all of her “troubles.” For these participants, adversity prompted a turning towards God, which may have provided for deeper religious experience through religious worldview-based meaning making. Frank and Tom’s experience both supported this supposition; they experienced God during health-related adversities. As Frank stated:

I think we tend to turn [to God] with major decisions to listen and feel His presence.

Participants tended to describe their relationship with God as personal and individual. Additionally, they often described ways in which they believed that their faith was “different.” In terms of TMT, participants believed that their worldviews were individualized; this mature faith is indeed illustrative of deeper religious experience. Below, I list quotations depicting this belief:

Winston: ...it must be a more personal relationship, and you must internalize your faith.

Alex: Well, first of all my faith is a different faith...I have always had a rather personal relationship with Him, and I certainly don't care if someone calls Him “Her,” but my relationship is with Him.

Werner: But, I believe, that the most important thing for me is that I have a personal God.

Emma: Each person has to experience his belief for himself.

Are individualized worldviews simply the experience of an individual faith, a faith that is experienced for her- or himself? These participants believed so.

*Relational faith: Partners and families.* Although the impact of others such as similar religious others and different others was not anticipated in the initial coding preparations for the present study, it was indeed a substantive focus in participants' interviews. Specifically, participants described how their families, friends, and religious others influenced their religious worldview beliefs. In this way, the religious worldviews of these spiritual nominees were not only internal, mature, and individualized, but they were also highly relational.

Half of the men in the study believed their wives had positively influenced their faith. For Karl, his second wife was one of the people that most supported his faith, and said that she was central in providing support for “spiritual matters.” For Winston, change in belief was directly tied to the religious conversion of his wife. He reported that her desire for religious guidance led

to his joining the church, which later inspired him to attend seminary and become ordained. He explained:

Nicky [his wife], because she had come to the church and really had been reborn. And so because she was so encouraging, and there were people in the congregation of the church in Milwaukee that we joined who were really mature Christians, and Nicky especially related to two of these women, then I became interested also.

Similarly, Inge recalled influencing her husband's belief, saying, "And I also managed to get him to go to church later on." Emma's experience with her husband, however, is unlike the others' in this sample. Rather than contributing to more institutionalized religious commitment, her husband's practices led to her attending church less and falling away from religious worldview adherence until after his death. She reported:

And my husband was a believer, but didn't go to church. And it stayed that way. He had such a strong personality and he could do it all on his own. And he also prayed and read the Bible, but he didn't want to go with the others to church—he didn't need it. He didn't need the fellowship. And it was that way with me too. I also didn't go to church anymore.

The fact that she and her husband did not share a relational faith deeply affected Emma, especially during his death, which she called "a frantic bereavement." For Emma, her husband's death left her alone and isolated due to limited resources—financial, social, and spiritual. Her reflection on his death was the catalyst for her increased activity in the church; the loss of her husband made salient her need for religious connection.

Apart from the potential for partners to induce change in religious worldview belief, respondents reported that their families also had a significant impact on the early development of faith-based worldviews. Indeed, 14 of the spiritual nominees spoke directly to the impact of family members on religious development. Many participants reported being raised in a Christian family:

Miriam: I was brought up by a Christian family and have always had the feeling

that He never was far away from me.

Lovey: Then my daddy, he was grand about the Bible. He just loved to hear the Bible read, or read it himself, or tell it.

Wilhem: Although I don't think that my father spoke to me about it. But he was a model for me, in his piety, in his goodness, and also in his cheerfulness.

Werner: I grew up in a family where it was obvious that we were converted followers of Jesus.

Emma: I believed since I was a child. I came from a Christian household.

The prevalence of relational faith among families is an important consideration for understanding religious worldview development. Based on this finding, I argue that TMT might also be situated within a life course framework. Doing so would highlight the influence of linked lives on formation of worldview beliefs that are shared with others and evolve over time.

*Relational faith: Religious others.* In the TMT tradition, similar others are those with whom an individual shares worldview beliefs. For the purposes of understanding religious worldviews, these individuals are religious others. The spiritual nominees utilized in this study overwhelmingly reported on experiences with religious others who offered support in times of adversity, strength in times of weakness, and perspective in times of consternation.

For both Tom and Frank, religious others were a source of community. Tom explains how this community has impacted his life and, to an extent, also his faith:

...it's more than Bible study, it's sharing...But we have gone through divorces, deaths, disappointments in children, and have supported each other. And we feel very open. No one in the group is judgmental.

This community reinforced the beliefs shared by religious others, likely contributing to the efficacy of religious worldview-based meaning making. Frank's experience is similar to Tom's:

I think we feed each other spiritually by showing a concern for everybody who has difficulty.

Elizabeth, too, described the importance of community and fellowship in her spiritual life. For

her, connection with religious others was a source of security:

Inside I feel connected with Him, but also through people who know they are secure in Him...And this strength that we find in the fellowship or in this climate, in this stillness, we can take with us in our everyday lives.

Her perceived strength through belief and fellowship may be emblematic of hardiness through religious worldview adherence. Similar to the experience of other spiritual nominees in this study, such strength may contribute to worldview beliefs that better cultivate crisis competence.

Miriam's reflection on the roles of religious others during times of adversity further demonstrates ways in which systems of belief foster psychological and spiritual growth. For Miriam, her physical limitations following a surgery on her back led to feelings of despair that were alleviated by counseling from her pastor:

He [her pastor] was my sole support and I love that man dearly...when I had my surgery on my back, I felt like I was going to be a cripple...I said "Pastor, I will never walk again like normal people." He said "Yes you will, Miriam. I've seen a lot people worse than you"...Every morning before he went to work he came by. Every morning for a month! I'd just about give up. I said, "I'll never [recover]"...and he said, "Yes you will, yes you will. You can't give up like that." He'd have prayer with me and that I'd feel pretty good...But I feel like if it hadn't been for him I would have given up.

*Change in self.* Participants believed that their outlook matured with changes in worldview belief, while also reporting an enhanced perspective through the process of growing older. This was reflected as openness to learning and development, becoming "ripe with age," and focusing more on family through a better understanding of life's finitude.

Building upon the belief that religion is an individual experience and that this individual religious experience provides perspective, Emma explained how she has changed through the intersection of her own aging with her beliefs:

Each person has to experience his belief for himself...he [should] be open to it, that what I wish [for younger generations]...That's the very first thing, and everything else comes after that. I really believe that one really grasps that when one is older...before [when she was younger] I thought, when one is healthy, one

can do everything. That's nonsense...I give thanks every morning when I wake up, "be thankful, that I wake up healthy."

She continued later,

I've had such a long life that I've experienced how God helps, how he stands near us, how I can pray and He hears me...some people haven't experienced God in their lives yet.

Emma's long life and experiences allowed her to know God and her religious worldview belief in a way that, she believes, differed from that possible at a younger age. Relating back to the literature on TMT, this age-experience dynamic may well be the difference between older people and college-aged people responding to mortality salience inductions.

Similarly, Miriam believed that she came to know God, and thus better integrate her religious worldview belief with her experience, through adversity. She reported:

...but until you've lost something like that [referencing death] and been through a lot of trials and troubles, you really don't know. But, I think it's all for a purpose, which I know is true. And I think it hit me. I think it helped my faith grow, I really do...maybe I've grown stronger in faith with all those troubles, 'cause you can look back and see and realize how much He's done for you.

This "looking back" perspective was described by others, as well. Emma and Elizabeth both reported that their present outlook, had they held it earlier in life, may have prevented them from being so disheartened and thrown around by worries as they were when they were younger. Tom and Anna also shared this belief; they felt as though aging is a learning process that leads to more understanding in late life. Anna explained:

Yes, things one learns fairly late. But one does learn what's important in life, and how to separate the important from the unimportant.

This separation of the important from the unimportant, for Alex, led to a focus on his family. He reported:

At this particular moment, at this particular time in my life, my horizon is pretty limited to my family. I don't have the interest I had in politics, or even in business, or even the church. I am beginning to appreciate how marvelous, I mean

that, how miraculous is a healthy gang of kids and grandkids, and to see them grow and blossom and multiply is just the most important thing in my life.

Taken together, this developmental approach to worldview belief suggests that outlook and perspective are dynamic and contingent upon lifespan experiences, both positive and negative. Further, participants reported a stark contrast in their present worldviews from their worldviews when they were younger. They believed that this experience was differentiating, often regarding younger people as different others despite sharing a Lutheran faith tradition. Indeed, lifespan experiences, at least within the purview of religious worldviews, were mechanisms of change.

### **Fearless Death**

The final goal of this study was to understand how these spiritual nominees, as individuals exhibiting deeply complex and individual religious worldviews, reflected on the prospect of their own deaths. Three-fourths of the 16 participants in this study discussed the prospect of their own death, revealing multidimensional conceptions about the ways in which death may be experienced in connection with God and religious others. For these 12 participants, there was no reported fear, anxiety, or avoidance of dying or the topic of death. Instead, death was rational and comforting, offering connection to others who had already passed.

***Rational death.*** Some participants believed that death was rational; it was a taken-for-granted part of living. Comments from Anna, Tom, Rebecca, and Lovey reflected this belief:

Anna: You have to go through this door [death], everyone has to leave this world. ... I'm 75 years old now. Every day could be my last.

Tom: [About his experience in war]...when we were at sea we never knew when we would be torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. But you live your life with the idea that it could happen and you can't sit around and fret about it.

Rebecca: [On the topic of losing close relationships] No, I knew it was time for them to go. They were all old and of course every person dies. It must be God's will, isn't it? Everybody is going to die. Some die old and some die young...I know He is my savior, and I'm ready to die, I think! When my time comes, I hope I'm ready.



Lovey: The Lord knows what's best and you have to take it like that. You know as sure as we're born that we're gonna die.

Tom's statement reflects how experiences with adversity, such as wartime involvement, may provide exposure to death-related thought, which may prompt worldview responses that abate death fear. Further, Rebecca's reflection on the loss of close relationships is closely tied to her feelings about her own death.

**Comfort in death.** Participants also found comfort in death. For Rebecca, death was not only rational, but represented a release from the suffering caused by her health decline. She reflected on the possibility of an additional surgery to improve her health:

I think I'm too old. I believe that I've got a good heart. I think my heart could stand it. I don't know. If it gets terribly bad, I may have to [have surgery]. Maybe I'll die before it gets too bad.

For Winston, health decline also made salient the reality of his own death. He explained:

And now as I'm 83 and have had a little heart problem, I feel, where my next step is going to be at this point...[death] probably, but I feel comfortable in that.

Emma talked about death as part of her faith, showing the capacity for religious worldviews to provide access to immortality:

Also when I'm with Mrs. A---- I often think about whether it will be our last time together. And then she beams at me and says, "Christians never see each other a last time." And that's a comfort...But I always imagine that it could be me [to die next]. I don't have any fear but it could be [me]. But it could be that way with the others, the ones I get along with so well spiritually. When they [will] go, when they are called, one doesn't know. I think that would be a great loss, a very great loss. But on the other hand, a big comfort because I know they [will] have it better.

Comfort in death through religious worldview belief was also supported by connection to others. Emma's belief that fellowship continued beyond physical death was one way in which the impact of death threat was lessened.

**Connection in death.** Like Emma, participants believed that death was a way in which

they could reconnect with relationships that had been previously lost. Martha reported that knowing that she would see her family again made it “easy to give them up.” Additionally, Miriam believed that through death, she could be with her family again and described the possibility as “wonderful.” About her own death, she said, “I’m ready [to see the others], but I’m not in no big hurry.”

*Dying peacefully.* Rather than focusing wholly on unknown aspects of death—parts of death that the individual will not experience while alive—some participants reflected on the dying process. This focus on the lived experience of dying rather than on dying as a way to an afterlife is consistent with past literature supporting the multidimensionality of death thoughts and fears (Hoelter, 1979; Neimeyer & Moore, 1994). Lovey reported that she desired to die in the same way as her husband—quickly and painlessly. The death of Miriam’s husband similarly influenced the ways in which she viewed the prospect of her own death:

My husband went to sleep at night, he’d been sick about a year, but he was feeling better that day than he had felt for months. He’d taken a couple walks, and the next morning he was dead. I found him dead in the bed. I hope that will be the way the Lord takes me, but we don’t have our druthers.

These women’s reflections add further nuance to the impact of past death experiences, and specifically the death of a partner, on the prospect of self-death.

In sum, I argue that older adults who have realized a deeper understanding of their life experiences and as a result, of their religious worldviews, such as those in the present sample, may have done so through processes of growth from adversity. In this way, there may indeed be a relation between growth from adversity and beliefs and feelings about the prospect of one’s own death. Adversity can bolster stronger, deeper religious experience. Similarly, deeper religious experience, such as spirituality or intrinsic religiosity, leads to less fear of death (Cicirelli, 2002). Accordingly, the relationship between religious worldview belief and fear of

death may be moderated by experiences with adversity.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

For this thesis research, I explored the extension of TMT to include Baltes' (1987) perspective of lifespan development. My goal was to better understand the processes by which life events, such as adversity, contributed to the development of religious worldviews that bolstered more positive appraisals of death. Three questions guided my inquiry: (1) What is the role of lifespan experiences in the development of deeper, more individualized religious worldviews? (2) How are experiences with adversity integrated into worldview belief systems? (3) How do older people with strong religious worldviews reflect on the prospect of death? To answer these questions, I utilized a sample of older men and women who were identified as spiritual nominees. My approach in using this sample was to study the life events of individuals having palpable religious commitment and spiritual development, focusing on instances of adversity and subsequent beliefs and feelings about their future death. My content analytic approach focused on these variables but also identified avenues for future theoretical development.

The results suggest that for these older men and women, experiences with and growth from adversity such as the loss of a family member, health decline, and involvement in war contributed to individualized religious worldview belief. TMT scholars have argued, "each individual creates his or her individualized version of the cultural worldview by integrating the multitude of experiences to which they have been exposed" (McCoy, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2000; p.53). Inasmuch as the older people in this sample experienced trauma and adversity across their lifespan, they too were provided with opportunities for spiritual growth through faith-based meaning making. The resulting "mature" and highly personalized religious

worldview bolstered hardiness that served to abate death fear and led to enhanced appraisals of death threat.

While my analysis thus far has concentrated on reporting and describing the findings of the present study, the sections ahead will focus on integrating and interpreting the relationship among TMT variables across development using the results of this study. Experiences with adversity are analyzed as analogous to Baltes' developmental losses. Conversely, responses to losses, such as those reported by participants in this study, constitute gains—growth in self and worldview. This strengths-based approach demonstrates how lifetime adversities contribute to hardiness and resilience and can promote wisdom-based knowledge that reflects an “understanding and management of existential issues such as death and suffering” in old age (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995; p.157).

### **Integrating TMT and the Lifespan: Examples from the Results**

#### **Losses as Adversity**

The lifespan perspective purports that effective adaptation to gains and losses is a central challenge throughout development and increasingly important into old age when losses are increased and gains decreased. Such losses were manifest in the present study as experiences with death and the loss of close relationships and health decline; experiences with social role changes were variable and did not wholly reflect trauma. Similarly, wartime experiences constituted another source of adversity for these individuals and demonstrated the historical embeddedness of individual change. The intersection of individual factors such as religious worldview belief with the sociocultural influence of war led to unique opportunities for growth within the purview of religious experience. This finding is consistent with research on posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), which suggests that traumatic experiences

can lead to changes in personal life philosophy and may challenge spiritual belief systems. Similarly, posttraumatic growth necessitates changes in self-perception and changes in relationships, both of which were found as sources of gains and growth in the present study.

### **Gains as Growth**

Several findings support the conclusion that experiences with adversity and loss contributed to gains and personal growth. Participants reported responses to adversity that led to changes in worldview belief, changes in relationship with God, and changes in self, often viewing experiences with adversity as a “second chance.” This pattern of meaning making within the purview of religion is concordant with past research (Pargament, 1997) and suggests that experiences with adversities may be mechanisms through which spiritual resilience can be achieved (Masten & Wright, 2010). As such, many participants reported that the loss of a partner or other close relationship led to an increased connectedness with God and the sacred, and presented new opportunities for religious belief and faith-based practice. In this way, religious worldviews supported individual plasticity by contributing to an enhanced potential for gains amidst losses.

New opportunities for relationships were also found in response to losses, which supports past research reporting that lifespan adversities led to the development of new relationships (Adams, 1987) and further promotes the application of posttraumatic growth to the experiences of these older people. These new social relationships tended both to support and be supported by religious worldview belief: religious others contributed to deeper religious commitment while, simultaneously, deeper religious commitment contributed to relationships with religious others.

Finally, participants indicated that lifespan experiences contributed to changes in self wherein growth was synonymous with an enhanced life perspective. Tedeschi and Calhoun

(1996) argued that this improved outlook on life was contingent upon emotional growth, feelings of self-reliance, and strength for future traumas. Indeed, participants' beliefs and experiences resonated with each of these foci: they believed that their present perspective would have benefitted them at earlier times in life, indicating a perceived emotional growth; they reported that self-reliance was attainable through God who acted as a guide and "foothold" in their lives; and they indicated strength for future traumas, such as death, when they reflected on the indeterminate nature of future time. This strength for future traumas is descriptive of hardiness (Bonanno, 2004; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982) through spiritual resilience and was indeed present among the older men and women in this study.

### **Wisdom as Spiritual Development**

The central argument for religious worldview development across the lifespan, through adaptation to losses and growth from adversity, was its hypothesized capacity to abate death fear and address existential crises. In line with previous studies (Cicirelli, 2002; Clement, 1998; Fortner et al., 2000), these men and women's individualized, intrinsic, and spiritual worldviews led to an absence of reported death fear and anxiety. Instead, participants viewed death rationally and believed it to be a comfort that provided connection with others who had already died. Baltes and colleagues (1995) upheld this rational understanding of death and suffering as inherent to wisdom-based knowledge; it speaks to the perspective and enhanced outlook that these older people reported, which further supports the connection between religious worldview development and wisdom-based knowledge cultivated as a result of lifespan experiences. These lifespan experiences with losses and adversity supported a realization of developmental gains that were spiritual, social, and psychological, and led to an absence of death fear among participants.

### **Further Consideration for Theoretical Development**

My findings point to the need for further theoretical development focusing on future time perspective (Lang & Carstensen, 2002) and a life course approach to understanding religious worldviews across development (Elder, 1994). Time and age were substantive topics for participants in this study; they believed that age provided important life experiences that influenced an “othering” effect of religious others wherein younger individuals, despite sharing faith traditions, were perceived as different. The source of this othering is complex and depends on both a “looking forward” and “looking back” perspective. Looking back on the lifespan juxtaposes present beliefs, views, and strengths with those held at earlier times in life and can contribute to a present perspective of individual change that influences beliefs about the future, such as mortality. As the results suggested, experiences with adversity may not only lead to growth but may also make salient the reality of one’s own death. In this model, the subsequent acceptance of life’s finitude can incite the looking forward perspective suggested by Lang and Carstensen (2002) wherein time may be viewed as more limited than at an earlier age, leading to a prioritization of emotionally meaningful goals (such as a focus on family relationships or spiritual development) rather than instrumental or achievement-based goals (such as career aspirations). Alternatively, the preponderance of reports of faith as relationally developed and experienced points to the need to understand religious worldview development in terms of Elder’s notion of the influence of linked lives on developmental outcomes (1994).

Blieszner (2006) argued that, “personal development throughout life takes place within and is affected by life course contexts and events” (p.4). Not only does her argument situate lifespan development within a larger network of social interactions and influences, but it also recognizes the need to better understand how concepts such as plasticity are enacted within

societal constraints on personal choice. For example, wartime participation was related to gender in the present study—men were soldiers during the Vietnam War, WWII, and the Korean War. Accordingly, their exposure to adversity was related to the enactment of gender, which influenced subsequent potential for personal growth (plasticity). This sociohistorical context positions experiences with adversity well within role- and gender-based constraints present in that society and at that time. Similarly, participants reported at length on the impact of social relationships on faith—they viewed death in terms of relations to others, they experienced religious worldviews in relation to others, and the loss of relationships was a form of adversity that led to subsequent spiritual growth. With Bengtson and Allen’s (1993) extension of Elder’s notion of linked lives to include family development, the life course approach challenges researchers to consider both faith-based social relationships as well as familial relationships in the formulation of worldview beliefs. For the participants in this study, the impact of linked lives on spiritual development was apparent in the commonality of participants reporting that an older family member most influenced their early spiritual development. As such, the impact of linked family lives and social relationships is central to the intergenerational transmission of religious worldview beliefs and subsequent spiritual development.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The central claim implicated in the present study is the capacity for worldviews to change over time. This assertion contrasts TMT’s present notion of static worldview beliefs that only “switch” when an alternative worldview belief system disproves the presently held worldview and leads to the adoption of a new set of beliefs (e.g., religious conversion and missionary work). Further, *different others* are those whose belief systems differ from one’s own while *similar others* are those with which one shares beliefs. Individualized religious worldview beliefs, as



they have been addressed in the current project, constitute change *within* religious worldview belief systems rather than *between* belief systems. For the participants in the present study, this within-worldview change was garnered through spiritual growth from adversity and led to the perception of similar others as different others on the basis of ontological development and despite sharing similar denominational beliefs. This finding challenges TMT's conception of similarity and dissimilarity of worldview beliefs as well as mechanisms of change.

TMT additionally asserts that the presence of different others, such as moral transgressors, causes anxiety and increases mortality salience. However, if the process by which older people's religious beliefs become more individualized over time leads to subsequent views of similar others as different others, then older people with highly individualized religious worldview beliefs may be in a chronic state of mortality salience. Despite the potential for increased mortality salience, individualized religious worldviews, which are particularly effective in the abatement of death anxiety, may prevent scholars from assessing the ways in which older people experience diversity of religious worldviews. Indeed, worldview change over time and its impact on the potential myriad conceptions of similar and different others is an important consideration for proponents of TMT and should be explored further.

Other considerations, which have been explored in earlier sections, include (a) families and other linked relationships as sources of early religious worldview development that affects later responses to crises and trauma and (b) opportunities and constraints that encourage or inhibit the development of individualized religious worldviews. More work is needed to incorporate lifespan and life course perspective in TMT. Nevertheless, the findings, discussion, and implications of this study provide first steps for extending theory about religious worldviews over time, in light of gains and losses, within families and among groups, and in the face of

death.

### **Limitations**

Apart from the pitfalls of secondary analysis, there are added limitations in this study. First is the limitation of the sample. Although the goal of the study was to explore exceptional responses to lifespan experiences, thus utilizing a sample of exceptional older people, the absence of diverse age groups and religious experiences limits the extent to which results can be extrapolated beyond the sample. Conceptions of change and development were also limited by the cross-sectional design of the study. Indeed, a true exploration of change over time would explore responses to adversity at multiple points in time across an extended period. For example, researchers might investigate TMT inductions beginning in early adulthood and continuing into late life, focusing on how responses to mortality salience change and develop into old age. They might also focus on worldview development in response to traumatic or stressful life events. Nonetheless, these possibilities were beyond the scope of the present study. Finally, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) noted a major challenge inherent to directed data analysis. The directed approach emphasizes the guidance of theory, which introduces the potential for strong biases to influence the data analysis. These biases were monitored and curtailed using the methods outlined in the trustworthiness section.

### **Conclusion**

Although the present study focused primarily on utilizing a lifespan development approach to understanding age-related differences in response to death threat and mortality salience, the results revealed the complexity of understanding religious worldview development across time. First, not only did experiences with adversity contribute to the development of more individualized religious worldviews, but they also led to fearless conceptions of death. This

finding builds upon research focusing on posttraumatic growth and uses a strengths-based approach to understanding individuals' religious worldview adaptation to gains and losses into old age. These religious worldviews, bolstered by meaning and faith, successfully abated death fear at the conscious level of awareness and enhanced beliefs and feelings about the end of life. Indeed, positive views about the end of life reflected a general acceptance of death and dying, which differs from the results of studies utilizing younger college-aged samples.

Second, the findings indicated that for these spiritual nominees under study, religious worldviews were relational. Support from religious others was important during times of crises and influenced the development of and change in religious belief. Subsequently, I conclude that not only would TMT research benefit from a lifespan development approach, but future research should also consider situating individual development within the context of life course theory. By doing so, TMT could move beyond the present assumption of religious worldviews as static to consider the impact of time, lifespan influences, and life course relationships on the efficacy of worldview defenses to abate death fear.

These results offer a model of optimum spiritual development across the lifespan. Where TMT research has been limited in addressing how old age might lead to an absence of death fear, this study takes a developmental approach to gains and losses across time that bolster later-life strengths. Indeed, the results suggest that lifespan adversities are opportunities for spiritual growth that enhance outlook and abate conscious death anxiety. Further theoretical expansion should incorporate the impact of linked lives on religious worldview formation and defenses, while also addressing ontogenetic development.

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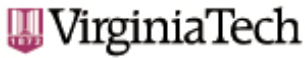
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Table 1

*Participant Pseudonyms and Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Nationality/Gender	Age
	German Men	
Hans		75
Karl		70
Werner		75
Wilhem		80
	German Women	
Anna		76
Elizabeth		65
Inge		74
Emma		68
	American Men	
Frank		74
Tom		80
Alex		79
Winston		83
	American Women	
Martha		77
Miriam		80
Lovey		89
Rebecca		93

## Appendix A



**Office of Research Compliance**  
 Institutional Review Board  
 North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech  
 300 Turner Street NW  
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
 540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959  
 email irb@vt.edu  
 website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** January 21, 2015  
**TO:** Rosemary Blieszner, Aaron Michael Ogletree  
**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** An Integration of Terror Management Theory and the Lifespan: A Qualitative Secondary Data Analysis  
**IRB NUMBER:** 15-056

Effective January 20, 2015, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

**PROTOCOL INFORMATION:**

Approved As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 4**  
 Protocol Approval Date: **January 20, 2015**  
 Protocol Expiration Date: **N/A**  
 Continuing Review Due Date\*: **N/A**

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

**FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:**

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

*Invent the Future*

Appendix B  
In-Depth Interview Questions

1. Looking back over your life, what stands out for you?
  - a. What kinds of things have been important to you?
  - b. What has stayed with you in your memory?
  - c. Tell me about your life right now – what is it like for you?
  - d. What do you care about? Think about?
2. Tell me about your relationship with God.
  - a. What things are most important to you as a Christian?
  - b. During what time in your life has God seemed far away?
  - c. During what time in your life has God seemed especially close?
  - d. Sometimes people who are Christians feel peaceful. Sometimes they still worry a lot. Which one of those best describes the way you've been feeling lately?
3. What person or persons have been most important in your spiritual life?
  - a. What would you like to tell the coming generation about living a spiritual life?
  - b. Do you feel connected to Christians who have gone before you? In what way?
  - c. Do you think Christians have a responsibility to work for justice in the world?
  - d. Tell me about how you try to put your faith into action in your life.
  - e. What do you think the world will be like 50 years from now?
4. What Christian teaching do you think is most important?
  - a. What teachings of the Lutheran Church have been especially important to you?
  - b. What teachings of the Bible have been especially important to you?
  - c. What Lutheran beliefs give you the most hope and comfort?
5. Questions about personal renewal:
  - a. Tell me about your Baptism.
  - b. Tell me what Holy Communion means to you.
  - c. Tell me about coming to worship service.
  - d. Tell me about your prayer life.
  - e. Do you have a favorite hymn? What is it? Why?
  - f. Was there a time in your life when you felt like you were given a second chance?
  - g. Do you feel God is present in the everyday things of life?

### Appendix C Code List

◇ Adversity - general	24
◇ Age group difference	11
◇ Bible not central to learning	2
◇ Change in belief	15
◇ Change in relationship with God	11
◇ Change in self	23
◇ Closer to God	32
◇ Conversion experience	8
◇ Death - general	28
◇ Death - self, general	25
◇ Death acceptance	10
◇ Death anxiety	0
◇ Death avoidance	0
◇ Death experiences	29
◇ Death fear	0
◇ Different others/diversity	40
◇ Effects of war	11
◇ Family impact	30
◇ Further from God	7
◇ Health decline	12
◇ Internalized faith	11
◇ Involvement in war	12
◇ Loss of a relationship	15
◇ Partner as different other	5
◇ Partner change in belief	1
◇ Partner influencing belief	8
◇ Perspective/outlook through God	15
◇ Religious others	48
◇ Response to adversity	20
◇ Social role changes	9

*Codes colored with blue and green are from Phase II coding; codes colored with red are from Phase III.*

Appendix D.1  
Audit Trail: Memo List

-  "Haughty arrogance of having exclusiv...
-  About relationships and loss
-  Age as indicative of different others
-  Beliefs about death
-  Bible not central to learning
-  Change in relationship with God
-  Comfort in Jesus
-  Death as a reprieve from suffering
-  Death Experiences vs Death - General
-  Different others
-  Differentiate between similar and differe...
-  Diverse groups
-  Experience with God
-  Findings
-  Gender experiences influencing worldvi...
-  Increased involvement in church after death
-  Influence of children on religious belief
-  Internalized faith/personalized faith
-  Partner change in belief
-  Perceived change or just a new realization?
-  Relationships
-  Social role changes
-  Thankfulness
-  The longer you live, the more you see it
-  Thoughts for analysis
-  Un-gendered God
-  Who are different others?



Appendix D.2  
Audit Trail: Preliminary Reading Reflections

**German Women**

**Anna: First Reading**

P1: Anna immediately begins with mention of the war (past) as well as the current war. She talks about her family, lessons learned, and the role of her faith: “Like a railing, that you can hold onto...” She talks about her perception of the positivity offered by the church and how faith plays a part in guiding morals. I also like how she points out that “you have to let go of everything” and how materialism should not be the goal of life. It reminds me of the redefinition of values in old age and how that may influence individualized worldviews. There is also talk about her relationship with a sister from her congregation, her relationship with her in-laws during the war, her family (husband, children, and grandchildren), as well as the young boy that came from “Persia.” A part to remember is when Anna is talking about the war and the struggles that she and her family experienced during WWII. She says that because of the war and that experience, they “learned one thing: not everything is worth something, only that which is in your head.” This makes me think about the role of the war and adversity in offering a mechanism through which worldviews and beliefs are reframed.

P2: Anna comments that her children were most important to her spiritual life because they forced her to think, to look, to read, and to be able to answer questions concerning faith. Excellent because of the way in which her children, and those relationships, may have led to a deeper understanding. This is important because it represents one way that people can reach that deeper religious experience. Another really important point that Anna makes is when she says that the German history with war contributed to her belief, that it deepened it. She says “There are times when you have to believe that despite all that’s happened, there’s still love and hope.”

**Anna: Second Reading**

Anna begins by talking about war. She also talks about time, and how getting older is important for perspective. I think this is a good point—time and the prospect of future time. Since older people are closer to death, they may engage in or perceive experiences differently, in a way that is more fulfilling than at an earlier time in life. She goes on to talk about the death of her husband and the influence of her children on her spiritual life.

**Anna: Third Reading**

Anna’s story is good because it offers a lot of examples of death, personal growth, spiritual connection, and aging. I will have to be careful not to frame her experience within solely the resiliency literature. Rather, I should be focusing on growth from trauma and adversity (or experiential growth) and how that may lead to deeper religious experience. I don’t think that she mentioned her own death, however.

**Elizabeth: First Reading**

P1P2: Elizabeth begins with talking about the war, the importance of religion in her life, and her relationships with her children. She also talks about being hospitalized because of her hip, which may be an example of adversity. She keeps mentioning how her perspective NOW is different, about having a clearer understanding of God, and about how worries less affect her now.

**Elizabeth: Second Reading**

Elizabeth talks about the war as one of the events that stands out. She talks about

her understanding of religion, saying, “The older I get, the more I understand, that God is with me along the way.” She talks about her hip as a time when she thought that everything was going bad. She also points out that older people are in a position than younger people to understand that “one should grab the last chance” because time is limited. I think this is really important in understanding how people experience religion in their lives, and may be why these people have felt closer to God as they’ve gotten older.

#### **Elizabeth: Third Reading**

Elizabeth has an example of adversity when she talks about her hip (loss of ability) but I don’t see her talking about the prospect of her own death. Her emphasis on time is important. If my argument is that experiences are the things that lead to differential perceptions of death among older and younger people, with some experiences being contingent upon time, then time itself is also an important factor. How are worldviews different? I can’t directly compare her perception of time now to her past perception of time, but I can say that she has perceived change. And really, perception is quite important in how people understand their experiences and their faith.

#### **Emma: First Reading**

P1: Emma starts with the unexpected death of her husband as one of the events that stands out in her life. She reports that she “didn’t actually really live with Jesus until after [her] husband died.” She also talked about the war, just as the other German women have. It seems to have, really, been quite influential in these people’s lives. Emma ends this part of the interview by talking about how, because of her husband’s profession and his personality, they didn’t have many social connections or friendships. So after her husband died, she felt quite alone—especially considering her geographic isolation.

P2: In this part, Emma recounts a conversation that she had with her granddaughter about God being neither a man nor a woman. This is an interesting reflection because I don’t find that it would be a common interpretation. She also says that she may never be able to understand God, but says that she is okay with that. She is comfortable with the ambiguity. She reflects on times when God is near, saying that when she prays, God is close. He is also close when she experiences happiness. She goes on to report about all of the good things that have happened from God through people (her sister and brother in law with the car; her sister in the church giving her money) that allow her to be happy. In a way, she is talking about her husband’s death as a transformational experience. It has brought her both spiritual as well as worldly gifts. Is it that her outlook on life is different since her husband’s death? Is adversity and trauma transformational? Rather, can it be transformational? Emma later reflects on her experience with her husband dying and being present for his death and how it was beautiful for her. Close to the end, she begins reflecting on the prospect of her own death in relation to her faith. She says that younger people believe that older people turn to religion because they are “close to the grave”, but she says that she is NOT scared of dying and that is not the reason that she has religion in her life. She says that younger people don’t yet understand because “Each person has to experience his belief for himself.”

P3: The most important part of this section is when Emma says that she got a second chance after her husband’s death. She says that she was able to find herself after her husband’s death. She says “I haven’t become better, rather have grown.”

#### **Emma: Second Reading**

She begins by talking about her husband’s death and her experience with his

passing. Her worldview beliefs, her relationship with God, guided her through the process and, it seems to me, helped her grow. Her daughter doesn't believe in God, and I wonder about how she may be viewed as some kind of different other/moral transgressor because of her deviance from Emma's faith. She says that, because of her husband's not needing religion, she lost contact with many Christians, especially because she was so busy supporting him. But after his death, she learned that "...one needs to be with Christians. One needs conversation about belief, one needs help every once in a while..." This connection with other Christians is really important, but I don't know how it fits within the TMT paradigm. She also talks some about her death and how she's not scared of dying, and about how her second chance happened after her husband's death.

### **Emma: Third Reading**

Emma's experience is a strong example of the influence of traumatic experiences in one's life. Her husband's death can be seen as transformative. She also has an interesting conception of religious worldviews, with the belief that each person has to experience religion for him- or herself. Time again is present here—she talks about the misconception that older people use faith because they are close to the grave and perceive time as limited, but she says that's not true; she says that she isn't afraid of dying. Could this just be an example of a functioning worldview?

### **Inge: First Reading**

P1: Inge opens with talking about how good her childhood and upbringing was before the war. Then, she reflects on her escape in the back of a truck because of the bombings and right after the birth of her child, who ended up dying because of the conditions. She was eventually reunited with her parents and husband and had more children. After opening a shop with her husband, Inge reports that her husband got very sick and began drinking a lot. His sickness came with a lot of bills and because he wasn't working, they didn't have the money to pay the bills. He eventually got sober but died shortly after at 55 years. She also talks about being sick for 8 weeks and how that was a very dark time for her. Following this, Inge is talking about the happiness that she got from her friendships in the church. Perhaps this is a point to take note that she is reporting happiness in her faith relationships. Then Inge talks about her relationship with her son and is crying. There are a lot of emotions. Also, another note: I should be thinking about how I want to code past, present, and future feelings and expressions.

P2: Inge says that her faith is like a child, which is interesting because I would expect something deeper and more contemplative. Inge says that God was farthest away when her child died and when the pastor wouldn't bury him because he wasn't baptized. There is also a lot of emotion when it comes to talking about her estranged son—the topic comes in on its own, which shows that this is something that affects her greatly. Following this, Inge talks more about death. She says that it was hard losing her grandfather, but that she isn't afraid of the deceased. Nor is she afraid of dying.

P3: Inge also reports that the death of her husband was the beginning of her second chance. I wonder if the men will report the same second chance experiences as the women.

### **Inge: Second Reading**

Inge recounts her childhood, saying that it was wonderful until the war when "worries came." Her husband was in Russia during the war, and she drove 8 days with her child because she needed to get out and away from the daily bombings. The child ended up dying from the journey, but the pastor wouldn't bury the child because it wasn't baptized. This stands out as

a very salient example of trauma, coupled with the presence of the war. She was eventually reunited with her husband, where they had two children and began selling clocks. This is where she begins talking about how her son suffered during that time, and how he has difficult from the beginning. Her husband got sick, had surgery, began drinking, got sober, and died. He was 55 and Inge was 50. More recently, she was sick with shingles for 8 weeks, and says, “That was a very dark time for me.” She also says that she has no fear of dying, which is interesting. Her second chance came after the death of her husband.

**Inge: Third Reading**

How can a traumatic experience be seen as a second chance? I guess that’s what she’s getting at—the experience brought her closer to God. Her worldview beliefs had to be enacted to achieve some kind growth after the death of her child, her husband, and the estrangement of her son.

**German Men**

**Hans: First Reading**

Hans begins with saying that there is no event that stands out in his life. Rather, what stands out is “an evolving and increasing...joy in belief.” He does talk about how it was hard for him and his wife to be told that they would be unable to have more children after their first, but that they were fine because they adopted a boy who, he later says, eventually got cancer. He was also in a military prison, but does not talk much about it.

**Hans: Second Reading**

Hans begins by saying that the thing that stands out in his life is “an evolving and an increasing...and joy, in belief and with what comes along with belief.” He talks about having a faithful marriage, discipline throughout life, and discipline even in his business practices. He only briefly mentioned his time in confinement, saying, “sleeping in the meadow outside, rain and nothing to eat and dirty and only 60lbs, maybe like a heap of ruins...” So he has some very real experiences with trauma but does not say much about them.

**Hans: Third Reading**

I wonder if time could not be a category itself, or if time could be subsumed under perceived change in religious experience. A lot of these people, Hans included, talk about a changing belief system. For some, this belief system changes in response to traumatic experiences.

**Karl: First Reading**

The experience that most shaped Karl was the early death of his wife, which left him as a widower with two small children. He goes on to talk about how religion did not help him through his wife’s death, and it didn’t help him in his second marriage, either, saying that he ended up “all alone.” His parents died after his second marriage ended. Karl then goes on to talk about finding his faith, and how God was always there even though he didn’t recognize God’s presence. He says “God has a plan for everybody...that I don’t understand.” I think this is another good point—these people evidence that they don’t understand God or life’s events, but they are fine with that. They are able to relinquish control, in a way. This also makes me think more about Tornstam’s gerotranscendence. The questions about feeling connected to past generations, and the concern for future generations. Generativity, maybe? Karl also reports that there is comfort in knowing that eternal life is assured through his boundedness with Jesus.

**Karl: Second Reading**

This is interesting—Karl says that he first started to believe ten years prior to the interview; this would mean that he doesn't really count as a lifelong believer, as the inclusion criteria would suggest. He says, "And before that, I went through this world just like everyone else." He says that the experience that most shaped him was the early death of his wife, at age 36. He says that he didn't really get to know God after his confirmation; that came later. He says that his spiritual life intensified after the death of his wife, and although God was always there and never seemed far away, it took the death of his wife before he realized that God was close to him. He talks about his own death in terms of eternal life, saying "the eternal life is assured to me...I will be born again in God."

**Karl: Third Reading**

The same events stand out to me—the death of his wife as impacting his religious experience. He does talk a little about his own death, but it's more of a nuance. I question whether I should code for death experiences (I think that I have that on my priori list of codes).

**Werner: First Reading**

Werner reflects on his time as a soldier in the war and a time when he was stuck under a house for 48 hours—this is one of the important events in his life. He talks about the Russian soldiers that saved him. I wonder, could they have just killed him? This would have been a question to ask in the interview. In either case, he really faced death. Later I do see that he says that the soldier just stood there with his gun to decide how to act, and he chose to give him honey. He goes on to talk about his education at Purdue, the importance of his education and those experiences, and his interests.

**Werner: Second Reading**

Werner begins by talking about his faith originating from his family's belief that it was self-evident—he never had a big conversion moment. But he does say that he was literally reborn when he was a soldier. He talks about his experience being buried under a house for 48 hours until Russian soldiers found him. The soldier looked at him, I'm assuming while deciding whether or not to let him live, and decides to give him a piece of honey and lays it on his tongue, like the communion.

**Werner: Third Reading**

Werner quite literally faced the possibility of his own death—during his time stuck under the house and when the Russian soldier decided to let him live. It would be really helpful if he talked about the prospect of his own death. I should make note here to look for that when I begin coding.

**Wilhem: First Reading**

Wilhelm talks about his profession as a doctor, his education, and his service during the war. He experienced cancer (prostate) and reports that he planned his goodbyes because the procedure wasn't well understood, saying, "you must come to terms with the end." These experiences are what make older people different from younger people, I believe. Considering normative and nonnormative events, it is more normative for older people to be prepared for the end because those experiences come with age. Wilhem goes on to talk about his inner faith, or inner foothold.

**Wilhem: Second Reading**

He starts by talking about experiences in the church, the death of his mother and his aunt becoming his foster mother, and the importance of the Christian community as an event

that stood out. He says that going to the student congregation was his second religious experience where he grew spiritually. Wilhem recounts his experiences as a doctor during the war, helping the sick, and hoping that the end of the war would come. He talks some about a Christian-attended death—I'm not sure that I know what this means. When asked what he worries about, Wilhem says, "Well, I don't worry about life at all, because I know that we have a perspective, a future perspective [that comes] with age." Then he goes on to say, "I used to think, how will that be, how can she?...How is it when one turns 90 or so and knows that only two years of life are left for him? We have this wonderful perspective of the future." He continues to talk about a tumor and cancer in relation to this perspective of future time, which is essential to this conceptualization of lifespan experiences and future stressors. He talks about how he prepared for the surgery in case it didn't work out, contacting the pastor to bury him and sending letters to his children, saying goodbye. When asked about what he would share with the younger generation about spiritual life, Wilhem says, "I would say to them that they should search out community with other young people, but also older people, those who probably lead." This makes me ask whether older people view younger people as different others? That would mean that within this worldview belief, there is the possibility that age distinguishes similarity or dissimilarity. REMEMBER THIS POINT. He talks some about the inner foothold and inner mission.

### **Wilhem: Third Reading**

Wilhem talks a bit about the different perspective that comes with age, the prospect of future time, and how he doesn't worry. He also talks about younger people being different, including those in the church, I believe. He explains that he had to prepare for his death when he was preparing for surgery to remove his cancer. These are all interesting and valuable for understanding worldviews, trauma/adversity, death, and aging/lifespan influences.

## **American Women**

### **Lovey: First Reading**

Lovey begins by talking about the losses of her family members, but says, "You know as sure as we're born we're gonna die." Her mother was the first to die, and that occurred while Lovey was in high school, meaning that she had to quit school to take care of her siblings. Seems that early on she had experience with death, but also had the skills to respond to it. Was her worldview at all changed by the death of her mother? Did it affect her faith? She continues talking about death—specifically, the unexpected death of her husband. She explains somewhat of a transcendent experience immediately following her husband's death, after she was asked to step out of the room. Lovey explains that "So, ever since then I've felt like I'm in Jesus' arms, so I'm not afraid of anything." This is very important because her religious worldview is changed through the death of her husband, and her response to his death. Again, I see the transformative capacity of trauma and loss. Here's another point—when people respond to trauma with religious practice, can that count as a peak experience? It is something that brings them closer to God. Lovey also lost her son in the war. She later talks about her own death, saying "I don't mind dying, but I don't want to die."

### **Lovey: Second Reading**

Lovey talks about her losses, about how there are only two of them (siblings, immediate family?) living, and that she seems to have accepted that. She says, "The Lord knows what's best and you have to take it like that. You know as sure as we're born we're gonna die." This is almost a mixed perception of death—it is in God's hands but it's also just part of life. She

goes on to talk about the early death of her mother, taking care of her family, and leaving school. She talks more about loss when she recounts the death of her husband, but also about how she used her faith to get through it—it's almost a peak experience for her. These experiences that bring people closer to God, good and bad, may be the way that people experience their worldview faith more deeply. Think about this in relation to how she views her own death. That's the big picture for this. An experience similar to that of her husband happened with her son and his involvement in WWII. I should also think about her experience with her chimney being blocked as a potentially traumatic event—she says that she had a guardian angel watching her, so maybe. She says, about the event, “It's a wonder I'm not dead.” Lovey goes on to talk about the “wonderful times” that she has with people in the church, which could be a theme from this sample but I'm not sure how relevant it is to TMT. As emotional resources for dealing with loss, these social connections are very important. But how do they relate to death perceptions? Perhaps they reinforce worldview beliefs, which then support better death response?

#### **Lovey: Third Reading**

Lovey recounts the death of her mother, son, and husband, with the latter two being seemingly transcendent. Lovey's perception of death is one in which God is in control, meaning that she may relinquish any associated anxieties.

#### **Martha: First Reading**

The events that stand out in Martha's memory seem to revolve around the unity that she had with her family. She also talks about how she sometimes questions God and his actions, saying, “I think that I would have to be totally out of it if I didn't question some of these things.” Interesting point—does a deeper religious experience come from questioning God? I think so. I also think that worldviews become more individualized because people may understand God's will differently, thus leading to different worldviews. Martha also reports that she questioned God, or thought that he seemed far away, during her parents' death and when her sister had a stroke. She follows, saying, “Tough things like that when you wonder. But, I had the strength to take it. Survive it and come out. I think that's the hardest thing to go through. To watch people suffer.” Continuing, I'm seeing that a big theme with Martha is work ethic and her belief that it's her duty to continue working. Martha also talks about not understanding Revelations, but being okay and not trying to confuse herself with it. She seems to be getting at that she may not understand some of the details, but that the important thing is her faith in God.

#### **Martha: Second Reading**

She talks about her tight-knit family, and her Aunt Carol as the Lutheran influence. She goes on to recount her beliefs and experiences in relation to her farm, those responsibilities, and how her ability to continue working comes from God. She talks a lot about how God guides her, saying, “I'm sure that if God gave us the power in the brain, that gives me the power to figure these things out and do them.” When asked about times when God felt far away, Martha says that she questioned God and wondered why when her sister had a stroke.

#### **Martha: Third Reading**

Martha's events are not as illustrative as the others'—she doesn't emphasize any particular traumatic event, aside from her sister's stroke, nor does she talk about the prospect of her own death. Based on her questioning God, I ask, how does questioning influence how we find answers? Is the process of seeking answers through religious worldviews important for deeper religious experience?

**Miriam: First Reading**

Miriam begins with talking about the importance of her marriage, how they didn't have children, and then the death of her brother, father, and mother. She also talks about her husband's death and how her mother helped her through it. She says (talking about the difficulties and losing her family, primarily her mother), "So I had it really hard again, but I came through it, and I feel like I've been enriched by it." She also talks about back surgery, and losing her ability to talk properly for some time. Talking about more recent losses, Miriam reports that she recently lost her uncle and then his wife. She says "But that's the last of them. I don't have any people, nobody left..." She says that all of the troubles have helped her faith to grow. She reflects on her own death, saying that she hopes the Lord takes her in her sleep like He took her husband. Miriam reflects on times when the Lord was especially close, saying that he was there during all of her troubles (health deterioration, losing her parents). She reports that, more than any other time, God was closest after her back surgery when she was down for a while and when she thought that she would never walk again. When thinking about the prospect of going to heaven, Miriam says "I'm ready, but I'm not in no big hurry."

**Miriam: Second Reading**

Miriam begins the interview by talking about experiences that stood out to her, including her relationship with her husband and their inability to have children. She then talks about the death of her mother, father, and brother. She talks about these experiences and how they were hard, but that they enriched her. Miriam talks about her back surgery and how she thought that she was going to "be a cripple." She says that her pastor came every morning and prayed with her, supporting her and bringing her from "down in the dumps." Note here: how do similar others support us in times of crisis and trauma? She goes on to talk about losing her uncle and his wife, and that being "the last of them." This brings me again to how people deal with loss and trauma—they must do it with support from other people, not only their worldview beliefs. I would say that these can happen together or separate. For example, she talks about the pastor helping her through her recovery, yet her uncle helped her through the death of her husband. What does this mean for worldview beliefs and TMT? She also says that she depends on Him now more so than when she wasn't alone. She does talk a bit about her own death, saying that she hopes to go while she's sleeping like her husband. She also talks about death as "When He takes me." She feels that God has been especially close during all of her "troubles" and that He is closer when times are tougher. So do people who experience trauma and adversity and use religious worldviews as a way through the troubles feel closer to God afterwards? Seems so—is this a way that beliefs become more individualized? I'll need to look back at the literature.

**Miriam: Third Reading**

Miriam recounts on her losses, saying that they enriched her religious experiences, and reflects on her own death, saying that she hopes to die in the same manner that her husband died. She also experienced physical limitations, which occurred more recently. During which, Miriam says that God was particularly close.

**Rebecca: First Reading**

I guess the first instance of adversity that Rebecca mentions is her husband's stroke that he never recovered from, his physical disability, and having to take care of him. She says that although she didn't have children, taking care of her husband was a full time job. She also has vision impairment, which is discussed from the beginning of the interview. She also had a broken hip/leg, which required that she spent time in a nursing home, followed by a stroke. She



quickly moves onto talking about everything that she's thankful for. She says, "I'm blessed...I know he is my Savior, and I'm ready to die, I think! When my time comes. I hope I'm ready." Rebecca talks about God differently than one of the German women who says that God is neither male nor female. Her understanding relies heavily on the bible. She says, "There's no place in the bible for that kind of thinking."

#### **Rebecca: Second Reading**

Rebecca immediately begins with talking about her husband's stroke that he never recovered from. She also talks about how she's spent so many years in the church. She says that she's legally blind, which could be considered an instance of loss or adversity. Her husband's stroke and loss of ability certainly is! Rebecca then recounted her experience breaking her hip/leg, recuperating in a nursing home, and having a stroke. She talks about things that she's grateful, saying that she still believes and has faith, and, "I know he is my Savior, and I'm ready to die, I think! When my time comes." The next point is something that stands out for me; she says, "I'm alone, but not lonely." This is an important part of the end of life for some people. But she still has her religious family, as I believe she goes on to say. But what happens when someone is simply left with his or her religious worldviews? Rebecca has a unique stance on religion and it's a bit different than that experienced by some other people in this group. She has a hard time thinking of God as anything other than "Him" and says (about feminist thinking...) "there's no place for it." Then she says that she never questioned God, not even during the years spent with her husband and caring for him, reporting, "You don't do that. You don't question the nature of God." She goes on to talk about problems with her bladder, saying that it's not too bad and "Maybe I'll die before it gets too bad." Going back to her stance on God and religion, Rebecca says, "I believe the words (of the bible) literally."

#### **Rebecca: Third Reading**

There are several instances of adversity in Rebecca's life—her husband's stroke, his death, her own physical limitations and stroke, etc. She also talks about the prospect of her own death. This is striking to me—none of these people let on that they are afraid of death. They say that they are ready, in a way. Again, see the Cicirelli article from *Journals of Gerontology*.

### **American Men**

#### **Alex: First Reading**

The events that stand out for Alex include meeting his wife, moving to CA, working with the church, and WWII. He also talks about his "mixed" marriage, primarily having to do with his wife being Catholic, and how their families didn't support them. Alex also experienced a stroke, which has limited his ability to get as involved as he would like to be. He also reports that he has "always had a rather personal relationship with Him, and I certainly don't care if someone calls Him, Her, by my relationship is Him." Alex also talks about the role of servanthood in his life. He also expresses an appreciation for value relativism, saying "I didn't really care if they were Muslim or Jewish or what, but that they see their situation in perspective of ethical, moral, and God-like behavior."

#### **Alex: Second Reading**

He begins with saying that the things that stand out most include meeting his wife and WWII. Alex also talks about his wife being a faithful Catholic while he maintains his Lutheran faith. He says that their mixed religion relationship made their faith life stronger. Alex recounts his young marriage to his wife, the birth of his daughter while he was overseas, and how his daughter is a Catholic Chaplain. In reflecting on his life now, he mentions a stroke that

limited his ability to “do what I used to do.” Alex says that he’s always had a personal relationship with Him and that he doesn’t care whether God is called “Him, Her, but my relationship is Him.” I think this speaks to the type of religious experience that Alex embraces—that of a religion that is personal to each individual. Alex says that he sees commonalities in diversity, rather than differences.

**Alex: Third Reading**

Alex’s “mixed marriage” is interesting and I think that I need to think more about this—when do different others become moral transgressors? This might be something that could be brought back into TMT and studied quantitatively. He reports that he had a stroke, limiting his physical ability, saying that he isn’t able to get as involved as he used to. He seems to have value relativism, which is important for tolerating/not being threatened by dissimilar worldview beliefs.

**Frank: First Reading**

Frank lost his older brother when his brother was 16. He then talks about his time in the army, his trip to Japan, and experiences that he had during his time in the army. Thought here: I wonder if interacting with diverse groups had any impact on their worldview beliefs? This is no something that I can really know – change – but it is an interesting thought for TMT. He goes on to talk about his children, their educations, and how important those relationships have been.

**Frank: Second Reading**

Frank talks about losing his 16 year old brother when he as 12, and how that was one of the worst experiences that he’s had. Frank goes on to talk about his time in the army, experiences in Japan, and the people that he met (diverse people). Frank talks a lot about his family, his wife (music), his children (education and now employment), and his grandchildren. He talks about his involvement with the church, extensively, but nothing stands out to me. Frank mentions his wife’s sister, Jean, who got polio and who was cared for by Frank’s wife. He talks about the deaths of his parents, brother, his wife’s parents, and so on. He says, “Yeah, I think we tend to turn with major decisions to listen and feel his presence.” His second chance, he says, has been when his wife had her seizure (and he questioned whether she would fully recover; he talks about it as if he were losing his wife altogether) and during his low points.

**Frank: Third Reading**

Frank doesn’t mention his own death, though he does talk about diverse experiences and even instances of adversity. If I can’t connect adversity with death perception then should I connect adversity with worldview individualization?

**Tom: First Reading**

Tom begins with talking about his career and retirement, followed by his close, extended family as something that stands out in his mind. This group seems to be well-off—they were either well educated or were able to ensure that their children were well-educated. He goes on to talk about his 3 years in the army and, briefly, the kinds of people that he encountered there. Tom recounts his experiences in the church over a gay issue, with him supporting having gays in the church and others disagreeing. He also said that he felt that the church didn’t support him during his daughter’s divorce and after his parents’ death. He also said that God was close during his heart surgery, and during his wife’s subsequent heart surgery five days later. He reported, “that was a traumatic experience.” He expressed, “I had to say goodbye to her not

knowing whether this was going to be the end or not.” He talks about recent funerals that he’s attended and how they weren’t particularly sad because the people were older. Tom reflects on “facing death” when he described his time in the army and how close he had been to danger. He says, about death, “You live your life with the idea that it could happen and you can’t sit around and fret about it.” These times—when the plane missed his ship and when the ship was spared during the storm—are the times that he feels there was a second chance granted.

### **Tom: Second Reading**

When reflecting back over his life about experiences that stood out, Tom talks about his school and experiences with diversity. I wonder how exposure to different groups might affect worldview beliefs? He isn’t talking about religious diversity, but instead about ethnic diversity. Still, if this stands out then what does that actually mean? After education, he talks about her service for 37 months during WWII in the South Pacific. Again, diversity. He also mentions it when talking about college. Tom continues talking about becoming a counselor, going back to the Korean war, resigning from service, and getting his MS. Tom talks about attending Central (the Lutheran church) while his wife was still in the Church of Christ, where her father was a Dean (?). They continued this practice until it became too much, and his wife started attending Central with him, and didn’t join until her father died. Again—the influence of having a family member or close relative and how this might be conflicting for worldviews. I think this points to other factors that influence worldview beliefs—almost a competing influence from family members. Tom continues in talking about his faith to the church regardless of his disagreement over the “gay issue.” This is a really good point in understanding how beliefs can depart from more mainstream belief systems: Tom points out that the church educated people on the “gay issue” prior to taking a vote, but most of the people who were against it never went to those educational meetings. He says that in his EXPERIENCE, he developed an understanding for gay people and that led him to have different beliefs about their role in the church. He goes on to talk about how his daughter wasn’t supported during her divorce and that was hard for the family, but the big picture idea is that experiences lead people to diverse beliefs. Are these more variable beliefs indeed individualized worldviews? I think so. He also talks about how, although things haven’t always gone “smoothly” in the church (he and his wife didn’t always agree with the church’s judgment, their actions, pastors, etc.), they stuck with it. So Tom reflects a belief system in which individual beliefs can depart from mainstream beliefs because of individual variability, and that learning and being open to new experiences can enrich experience for everyone (maybe not everyone, but overall). Later, when reflecting on his relationship with God, Tom says that he has had questions and doubts but that his relationship continues to grow. This is such a “mature religion” stance on religious experience. Is this common with our sample? I think so. He talks about support from similar others (religious peers and his wife) in dealing with traumatic experiences as a group. He says that his religion has been one of “education and growth throughout my life.” I really like where, when talking about his in-laws thinking that he’s damned for being Lutheran, he says “I am perfectly satisfied, and I will take that chance.” Seems that he’s being confronted with alternative worldview beliefs yet is happy to accept the ambiguity of seemingly competing rights to immortality. Tom goes on to talk about a time when God was especially close, saying that it was when he and his wife had their heart surgeries. He says “I had to say goodbye to her not knowing whether this was going to be the end or not. So I felt particularly close at that time.” According to Tom, that was a time where he felt closest yet it was also the most difficult time that he has experienced. Tom begins the interview by talking about how he’s been to four funerals recently. He talks about the most recent, saying “[about her

having Alzheimer's]...He looked just really beat. So it will be a tremendous relief for him, but difficult because they were such a close relationship." This is a new perception of death that hasn't been mentioned yet—death as relief. I think this might resonate with the rest of the literature on the multidimensionality of death experiences. He goes on to talk about becoming a "fatalist, you never know when your number is going to be up." He explains that they had to accept death and not worry about it. When asked about whether faith was helpful during this time, Tom says, "Well I would say that it was helpful to me that in the situation we were in, that I surrendered myself." Think about this...He also talks about these times in the war being those times when he's felt like he has gotten a second chance.

### **Tom: Third Reading**

Tom's experiences are quite good in illustrating adversity and trauma, and how individual experiences lead to individualized faiths. He reflects on the prospect of his own death within the purview of his religious experiences. His narrative is very content rich and I will have to be careful with drawing these complex connections.

### **Winston: First Reading**

The first event that Winston reflects on is the early death of his mother when he was ten years old. He doesn't say much about his father's remarriage to his aunt before talking about moving to California and then back east. Later, he talks about his relationship with God, saying that he's comfortable with his relationship with God and with his next step (death?). He goes on about his beliefs, his work with the church, and his life since retirement.

### **Winston: Second Reading**

He briefly talks about the early death of his mother, after which his father remarried his mother's sister. Winston talks about the influence that his wife, Nicky, had on his decision to become more involved in the church. He had initial trepidation getting involved, but supported her participation anyways. When talking about his relationship with God, Winston says that it's settling down (decreased church participation?) but maturing. I like this point because it gets at the idea that mature religion doesn't require overt participation. He goes on to say that at his age (83) and with his heart problem, he is comfortable with what the next step in his life is, likely referring to death. Later, he says that God was far away right after his confirmation when he "really had no relationship, and really never thought about it." Winston also speaks about the relationships that were important to his spiritual development—what would this mean for TMT? Think about this in relation to lifespan development and TMT concepts—similar others, different others, etc. He also says that his peace comes from "assurance of salvation." This is consistent with the literature suggesting that people find peace and are less anxious about death when they have a stronger relationship with God. Perhaps think about the Cicirelli article? He talks about advice that he would give young people, saying "[faith] must be a more personal relationship, and you must internalize your faith." I think this gets at the deeper relationship that I expect—this older person says that younger people should know that faith should be deeper. In this way, worldviews should be deeper...he doesn't say that they would be more individualized, but this is the connection that I make. Later, when talking about modeling his faith through action, Winston explains that it hasn't really changed, only become more personal. So for Winston, faith and enacting worldview beliefs is constantly developing.

Final note: Think about the TMT conceptualization of changing worldview beliefs—when individuals are confronted with enough evidence to lose faith in their present worldview, they may change to an alternative worldview with more "evidence" or a better argument. So in

this way, Winston's wife offered enough evidence for him to convert or change his beliefs, thus being an important person in his life spiritually. This isn't something that I thought about in conceptualizing my original codes, but could be useful in offering support to TMT in the third phase of coding.

**Winston: Third Reading**

Winston's individualized religion is very important to his experience with adversity and loss. He finds peace when thinking about his own death, saying that he is comfortable with the next step. He suggests that young people should have a personal relationship with God, and I think that this is very important. But as others have said, that relationship, experience, and perspective comes through living a long life (I believe).