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Reflecting on Resilience:
Insight into Resiliency Development and Utilization
in Oregon's Older Adults from 2020 to 2022

by

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Abstract

Introduction

The events of the last 2 years have complicated the lives of older adults throughout the world. For many, their survival can be traced back to one key trait: resilience.

Background

In the state of Oregon, the years 2020-2022 came with a host of issues that expanded past the COVID-19 pandemic. These events provide context for the world our storytellers discuss. Resilience, whether inherent or learned,

Methods

Using a snowball recruitment strategy through the efforts of community organizations and senior centers, 4 storytellers sat down to describe their resilience in different ways. They were asked to reflect on their own life experiences, how it influenced their resilience, and how they would define this trait for themselves.

Results

The themes of standing your ground, wanting to support and be supported, and existential concern vs. connection arose through narrative and thematic analysis.

Discussion

Each life story shared and reflected upon highlighted how one would have the capacity to survive the last two years. Our storytellers found their resilience in watching others go through similar trials and in having experienced some of their own.

Conclusion

Knowing someone's key memories and life story can help identity trigger moments that may've led to their current resilience bank. This study could be expanded upon past the undergraduate level by speaking to older adults outside of Oregon or by doing a more targeted recruitment process.

Introduction

The events that took place over the last 30 months are ones no generation could've prepared for. Unlike anything seen in modern history, humanity experienced relentless political, economical, environmental, and biological hardships. In all of the evolving guidelines and landscapes, there is one cohort specifically who were cautioned more than any other: older adults.

As researched by the World Health Organization, older adults' were the largest at-risk group at the beginning of 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Within the first year of the pandemic, those 65 and older made up about 75% of all coronavirus deaths in the United States (Bosman et al., 2020). Though the threat of disease was there, isolation and stress caused older adults and their loved ones to take pause. In order to get out of this and see the other side, communities were required to do what they considered 'right' to ensure survival.

The lengths and compromises taken by communities and individuals alike prompted, for me, the following questions: when the world throws you its worst, what pushes you to come out the other side? Is it the lifetime of moments lived before that gives strength or is it something you're born with? Resilience, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress," or "bouncing back" from difficult experiences (MacLeod et al., 2016). Though studies have been done of resilience and how it develops strategies for coping and processing (Clark et al., 2019; Lavretsky, 2014; Farber et al., 2020), this limited study aims to understand the moments that trigger the development of resilience and how it was utilized in 2020 and 2021. Through interviewing a micro sample of Oregon's older adults, we find a deeper insight into the minds of our aging and the stories that push them forward.

First we will review how 2020 and 2021 affected Oregon; from the coronavirus pandemic to the environmental crises. Exploring these current events will add context to the topics discussed by our storytellers. Using narrative and thematic analysis (Feldman, 2004; Seidel, 1998), we will comb through their stories. Through their lens and worldview, we will see the definition of resilience challenged, built upon, and restated.

Background

Oregon, much like the rest of the United States, saw the happenings of the last two years span much larger than that of the coronavirus pandemic. Political strains, climate crisis events, and local leadership all contributed to the stresses on older adults as they navigated threats from all sides.

COVID-19

In the state of Oregon, those who were 60 and older only made up about 18% of all COVID cases, but nearly 57% of all COVID hospitalizations in 2020 (Oregon Health Authority, 2022). These numbers have not been compiled yet to reflect on 2021.

Between the three counties of study, there were over 31,000 coronavirus cases in adults above the age of 60 beginning in February of 2020 (Marion County, 2022; Washington County & Multnomah County, 2022). In Marion county, seniors made up just under 56% of all hospitalizations (Marion County, 2022) and between Washington and Multnomah counties, the hospitalizations were 51% (Washington County & Multnomah County, 2022). This information is current up to May 20th, 2022.

State & Local Leadership

Throughout the pandemic, Oregon governor Kate Brown's popularity wavered. In the 98,379 square miles of Oregon, the most liberal leaning region is the Portland metropolitan area. This area also includes densely populated suburbs such as Beaverton; Tigard; Gresham; Clackamas; Milwaukie; and Hillsboro. Crossing into the rural outskirts of Portland as well as the southern and eastern parts of the state, politics takes on a whole other color. Because of these stark differences in beliefs and politics, the decision-making demonstrated by Brown's administration was highly criticized and critiqued.

On March 15th of 2020, one day after Oregon's first COVID-responsible death (Jaquiss & Monahan, 2020), governor Brown was still deliberating whether to shut down businesses. She had already taken the steps to eliminate the spread via crowd control. As observed in Willamette Weekly, Brown's hesitancy to ask for federal assistance and commit to a safety strategy was only dissolved by the threatening words dealt out by other Democratic leaders in the state (Jaquiss & Monahan, 2020). Though the movement was slow in the beginning to protect the general public, action was swift when it came to older adults throughout Oregon.

Speaking in relation to the March 3rd decision to isolate senior housing in the state, Jim Carlson said "I don't know if we were the first, but we're amongst the first states to do that ... by taking aggressive action early, I think we have slowed the number of cases" (Jaquiss & Monahan, 2020). Jim, Oregon Health Care Association (OHCA)'s chief executive officer and president, spoke candidly about the state response and his organization's role in seniors' fight against COVID. Though the influence was primarily focused on long term care providers and facilities, the information that was provided and public had a ripple effect in other parts of senior's lives. For example, many senior centers followed suit, closing their doors and adapting their programming in a way that would still provide community when isolation was suggested.

Dodie Brockamp, the executive director of the active Silverton Senior Center, was one of those local leaders who refused to give up on their seniors. She spoke with *Aging in the Willamette Valley* in late 2020, chatting with the shows' hosts about how services changed because of the pandemic. Putting safety at the forefront, she explained how she and her team utilized Zoom. In addition to exploring virtual avenues for connection, they also provided physical spaces for specialty medical providers such as podiatrists to be better accessible to their members during the strictest parts of lockdown. By doing this, the senior center was able to stay afloat and evolve.

Racial & Political Strains

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the same racial and political strains that put pressure on the United States had similar effects throughout the state of Oregon. Black Lives Matter protests in downtown Portland made international news (Levinson & Olmos, 2020) while Oregon's own capital had a breach in December of 2020 (Wilson, 2022), less than a month before the January 6th riot in Washington D.C.. What was reckoning for some put strain on other's outlook of the future of the state. These qualms are far from being solved.

Climate Crises

From the rocky coastline that borders the Pacific to the sunset-hued slopes of Eastern Oregon's Painted Hills, it is clear that this state's terrain and landscapes are diverse and abundant. With each region having its own unique draw, the whole state is home both to older adults as well as Earth's changing climate. At the intersection of environmentalism and gerontology lies the lives of those who cannot be so easily moved for fires, and don't consider

power outages during snowstorms or heatwaves a minor inconvenience. For seniors, these concerning and increasingly occurring landmark events made 2020 and 2021 that much more difficult to survive.

In Southern Oregon, September of 2020 brought the Almeda fire. Over 3,200 acres swept through the scattered towns of Phoenix, Ashland, Talent, and Medford (Neumann, 2020). In its path was “Northridge Center, a senior assisted living facility near Phoenix” where 50 residents and their staff were able to narrowly escape with their medicines and records in tow (Neumann, 2020). Affected by that same fire was a 74-year-old who, had it not been for the call from her daughter, she wouldn’t have gotten out of her house in time to both warn nearby neighbors and save herself (Arthur, 2020). Though they were able to escape, their entire 65+ mobile home village was destroyed.

From downtown Portland to across the Columbia River Gorge, unprecedented power outages and snowfall hit in February of 2021. At the time, over 330,000 Oregon residents were without power (Gromley, 2021). For some, these conditions lasted days as ice storms continued past that Valentine’s weekend. Though Portland General Electric (PGE) had thousands of their employees out and working on restoring power (Gromley, 2021), the surrounding rural Clackamas and Marion counties went over a week without electricity (Sherwood, 2021). Access to heat, food, and even their nearest neighbors was limited depending on where they were located.

Resilience: Inherent vs. Learned

At the heart of the topic of resilience, researchers attempt to understand where it comes from. On one side, we consider this: when born, a person has a natural set of skills, traits, and

abilities to survive. These can all be refined, sure, but their development and growth is predetermined. When resilience is applied to this sentiment, the concept of inherent resilience is introduced. Though this is an idea grounded in organizational leadership theory (Marone, 2020), it can be applied to the resilience an individual can hold as well. This type of resilience is not one that is universally accepted. The type society upholds and breaks down most often is that of learned resilience.

Learned resilience is based in the belief that every experience, trauma, and success shapes us and prepares us better for the future. As put by Clark and colleagues in *What Do We Know About Resilience in Older Adults? An Exploration of Some Facts, Factors, and Facets*, “resilience is a capacity built up over time, one that is acquired and strengthened through responding to stresses and strains over the life course” (2019). Considering this, there are lots of ways one could picture their own resilience; from a glass of water that can be completely emptied to a spring that has a continuous flow, the act of acquiring and building up resilience is one that each individual goes through.

Previous Studies

In previous research where older adults have been studied for their resilience, the focus is often put on the amount they contain or what coping strategies they utilize to activate it (Fuller & Huseth-Zosel, 2020; MacLeod et al., 2016). In this study, we attempt to scratch the surface of resilience development; specifically moments or memories that seemed to trigger this development.

Specific to the coronavirus pandemic, researchers Heather Fuller and Andrea Huseth-Zosel (2020) interviewed seniors in North Dakota. With the interviews taking place in

early 2020, they explored the coping strategies utilized to make it through the earliest stages of the pandemic, specifically lockdowns.

In their conversations with participants, they found that many discussed the fear laced throughout those early weeks. Reflecting on the unknown and the difficulty of social distancing, the seniors leaned into three specific coping strategies to ensure they'd come out the other side:

- Staying busy
- Seeking social support
- Having a positive mindset

They found that despite “predominant messaging about the vulnerability of older adults during the pandemic (Ayalon et al., 2020), [their] findings highlight[ed] the resilient nature of older adults in terms of their psychological coping and adaptability during this crisis (Lind et al., 2020)” (Fuller & Huseth-Zosel, 2020). Seniors broke down the efforts they went through to learn new technologies to connect with their families and other support systems as well as diving deeper into already established hobbies. In reading their reflections,

Methods

Interview Design

The designing of the semi-structured interview guide was based on the desire to allow the storytellers to build their own narrative. In academia, narrative can be described as “a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole” (Feldman et al., 2004). As reflected on by Clark et al., this is “an interesting and emergent approach to understanding and study[ing] resilience” (2019). It draws in the

interviewee, replicating the feeling of a conversation or collection of stories being told as opposed to an academic interview.

Throughout the development phase, it was imperative that the primary focus of the interviews be the participant and their interpretation of the thesis question. What few structured questions that were provided within the interview guide were all phrased as “the last 24 months” as opposed to “during the pandemic”. Because of this clear distinction, the storytellers were able to lead the study in a way that best outlined their life experiences while still providing enough structure for the researcher to find thematic connections (Seidel, 1998) between other interviewees. This also allowed for distinguishing follow-up questions to lead the interviewee back on track if need be, or for the expansion of specific ideas.

Recruitment + Participation

Recruitment was done via email, phone calls, and reaching out to businesses and organizations via social media. Through this process materials were sent out, allowing for these organizations to do advertising across several different mediums dependent upon the most current COVID-19 guidelines. Of the 12 facilities and organizations that were reached out to, 7 responded. 2 said they’d closed completely and weren’t sure when they’d be opening up, 2 said they were in the process of opening and would begin advertising at that time, and 3 sent them out either via newsletter to the seniors in their community or posted flyers physically in their facilities. 4 participants across 3 Oregon counties responded due to the snowball efforts of their local senior centers and other community partners.

Data Collection

Interviews began in October of 2021 and were conducted in-person, either in public places such as parks or in the participant's own home. Safety precautions were taken, such as verifying vaccination statuses, maintaining a minimum of 6 feet of space between the interviewer and participants, and wearing a mask. At the time of each of the interviews, Multnomah, Washington, and Marion counties had amended COVID guidelines to allow for these sorts of meetings due to the state meeting a 70% vaccination rate in July (Oregon Health Authority, 2021). All interviews were recorded by the researcher.

Analytical Strategy

Once the interviews concluded, each one was transcribed with the assistance of Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence software. After cleaning up each transcription in the software, the researcher then exported them to a Google Document. Next, the researcher manually analyzed first using a thematic lens, identifying different but consistent themes across the transcripts. Key local events, life milestones, and personal definitions of resilience were highlighted for expanded research. Identifying specific stories played its own role in the analysis as well, allowing for lessons or trigger moments to be considered in relation to resilience development.

Results

Redefining the Definition

In the semi-structured nature of these interviews, the storytellers were only asked 5 specific ‘leading’ questions. One of these questions was: “I’d like to ask you how you would define resilience?”

Storyteller A: “Just never doubt. Just get up, go back to your business when things go wrong. You make a plan; decide where you're going wrong and change.”

Storyteller B: “Whatever challenge comes along, you're able to meet it – maybe not overcome it. But you're able to meet that challenge and do your best to overcome, but sometimes you just have to assume. With the example of my son – I can't overcome his disabilities, but you just have to meet it head on and do the best that you can. To me, that's resilience; it's picking yourself up and keeping on.”

Storyteller C: “Either bounce back or adapt.”

Consistent with each storyteller’s response was the idea that when life throws something at you, you get back up and adapt. This does not stray from what is defined by the American Psychological Association (MacLeod, 2016). Below, we see one storyteller reflect specifically on the memory of the morning after their father passed. They later describe how they visualize resilience, adding to the diverse lenses that color these definitions.

Storyteller D: “It was a shock to my mom, needless to say ... He died early in the morning. I didn't hear the phone call. I must have been sound asleep. She [had] always wanted to be a nurse and it never worked out ... [she] came in and, you know, turned on my light and talked for a little bit. She wanted to make sure I was really awake. And then told me that he had died ... she was just sitting there. And then she said, ‘I've never filled out a tax return.’ I watched her over the next couple of years ... she continued school; she aced everything.”

Storyteller D: “I guess the first thought that comes to me is the image of an anchor – the things that hold you steady. They don't stop a boat from moving...the tide and the waves and this and that, depending on where you are. It doesn't stop you from moving, but it keeps you within a certain safe, manageable place. And if a storm comes, one of the things that happens, I think, to keep the anchor analogy going, is you have to shorten the anchor, sometimes you have to draw

closer to the anchor, in order not to get thrashed around, depending on what is going on. And this is the extent of my knowledge about boating.”

For each storyteller, this question immediately followed time for them to speak a bit about themselves and what they believed to be their ‘key traits’. By giving the storyteller time to describe pieces of themselves and their life first, this opened the door to definitions that linked back to experiences they’d previously shared.

Having Support and Being A Support

Both the act of being a support and having a strong support system were at the heart of many conversations. While specific examples were given, for some, it was the general idea of being helpful and supportive to whoever may need it.

Storyteller B: “We would do our darndest to get through it and to help our neighbors get through it, and help the guy across the street, and the kids that are back there, and the young family that lives there. You know, people down the street...I don't care if I know you or not. If I can help, if I can go over there and help you with whatever, I think that's part of resilience. If I can help you, that helps me ... I know I'm giving, I know I'm helping, I know I'm making a difference for you. And that's an important thing to me, is to help other people.”

Storyteller C: “You know, I didn't know how, but I knew, even if things shut way down, I'd be able to go out and maybe get a loaf of bread from somebody by fixing their lawn mower or, you know, changing a light bulb in their house if we had power. During the fires ... we were the only ones with generators. And so I managed, I have a big steel plate and we put the generator on the

steel plate and then drag[ged] it ... to the neighbors or whatever to keep their freezers going and different things that way ... wow, this last year. I think part of being resilient is being, however you can, prepared ...”

Storyteller C describes a time explored in the background section above when fire fears forced local electrical companies to shut down. This put many rural seniors in a tough spot, but the idea of being prepared and resourceful in the face of the unknown in order to provide support was the foundation of their story.

Holding Your Ground

Via familial relationships and the mention of divorce, the emergence of establishing boundaries and holding your ground was touched upon in each of their stories.

Storyteller D: “Meanwhile, I had moved back to Oregon. And I was divorced, which was one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Storyteller C: “I was born and raised around agriculture and livestock and got married, at oh 18, something like that. And the first wife and I moved to Oregon, because the family business was not what we thought it should be... and my first wife and I separated after 10 years.”

Storyteller A: “I was married 24 years. And one day I said, ‘this is not working...’ and I got divorced after 24 years.”

For one storyteller, it was not a divorce that was illuminated, but instead the strength cultivated for their child. They took the time to describe what life has been like providing and defending for them.

Storyteller B: ‘You just have to change everything because you don't expect to have a child with disabilities. And I can remember, as a young mother, this was 30-40 years ago, when my son was born, he didn't thrive. And I can remember the doctor saying, ‘Well, just put him away.’ And it

was like, 'You don't know me. We're not shelving him somewhere.' And then he grew. And he kept growing. And he kept achieving milestones very late, but he kept meeting some milestones."

Existential Concern vs. Connection

In a couple of interviews, existential concerns or stated connections were discussed. Whether from their own individual power or from a higher one based in religion, reflections on the connection to something bigger than themselves recurred.

Storyteller D: "I think for me, the struggles were more just dread for people. What is going to happen? You know, how are we going to keep people safe? How are we going to deal with the idiots? Yeah, how am I going to deal with my anger at the idiots who think that they're just making a choice for themselves? And are too, let's just say, ill-informed to realize that they're doing more than that. That's one of the things that really worries me now. Is this a breakdown in community? We see it some here. And then nationally, it's just appalling. Yeah. What can we do to nurture that? And I didn't have the answer."

Storyteller A: "So then I adopted my daughter... She is my only daughter ... and I used to pray for lots of kids. When [their daughter] was 18-19 or 19-20 God said, "Oh my god, I forgot your prayer!" So he gave my daughter two sets of twins and a single. Identicals, a single, fraternal. So I have all these grandkids!"

Discussion

As described above, the thesis of this study was to identify the moments or trigger points in one's life that may cause the development of resilience. Explored in the excerpts above and in the entirety of the interviews, the general ideas of support, holding one's ground, and considering something bigger than ourselves were at the core of many experiences described by the storytellers.

To begin, the storytellers were asked to supply their own definition of resilience. Within these definitions, keywords such as adapt, overcome, and change were identified. As the

interviews continued, the stories that they would tell about their lives illuminated further their reasoning for these definitions. Harking to both the past and the current events of the time, stories told varied greatly depending on what impacted them the most and what triggered cascading memories. Clark et al. suggests that “...the importance of understanding an older individual’s life history and how adversity has been addressed previously and incorporated into current experience” (2018) is the key to understanding how their resilience continues to build.

The first theme that connected all 4 storytellers was one of support. Similar to one of the coping mechanisms described by Fuller and Huseth-Zosel (2020), support in the eyes of adversity was highlighted as a key building block in resiliency’s development. Knowing that your community, related or otherwise, has your back allows one to explore life without the fear that hiccups will stunt their growth. Each storyteller relayed a memory of a time when they were able to provide for someone else or be provided for. Switching the narrative and sharing times that they were able to help someone else is also important to note, especially as older adults. With a population who was defined as vulnerable and high-risk during this time, bringing to light the responsibility they bestow upon themselves is empowering. Evidence from other studies suggests that this type of mutual aid and community support is consistent with psychological growth (MacLeod et al., 2016; Brockie & Miller, 2017).

In standing their group, the theme of prioritizing the interests of self and those closest to self established the second theme. In doing research, it was surprising to see just how little academia has covered the issue. Typically relating to economics and other business studies, it was difficult to find other social science journals that had pursued this mindset from a research perspective. In *Psychological Science*, an article titled *Self-Interest Without Selfishness: The*

Hedonic Benefit of Imposed Self-Interest, participants were put in a scenario that juxtaposed choosing self over choosing to help others. They stated that “If an individual selects an option of self-interest, he or she may feel guilt, unease, or even reproach for prioritizing him- or herself above others” (Berman & Small, 2012). However, in the case of our storytellers, there was no remorse or inkling of regrets shared about these decisions. They were all mentioned either as passing facts in the grander scheme of life or as a point of pride.

In our third theme, the storytellers explored ties to a greater good or a greater community than one you’re immediately connected to. Reflecting on concerns or connection, seeing themselves as a bigger piece of life’s puzzle and the influence it can have was interesting. Specifically for prayer and other positive exploration of this theme, Strang et al. (2001) describe the phenomena of existential support. She studies this in relation to patients with terminal brain cancer, their families, and their providers. Not unsimilar to our own storytellers, fear of the unknown and wanting to find peace in the chaos encouraged their journey of existential support. Sometimes it was described as religious and others found this grounding in a part of their culture.

Limitations + Conclusion

Given the nature and time of the study, there were many limitations. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many of the organizations that would historically have access to the eyes and ears of senior citizens were either closed completely or severely restricted in their outreach. Though this wasn’t the case for all of them, the general hesitancy to share vulnerable life details and take time to meet with a stranger was not desirable to all.

As an undergraduate study, there were also limitations in time and reach. If worked on by a team of researchers, more variables could be added such as those living in long term care facilities or expanding upon the rural versus urban influences. This would've also allowed for longer interviews, gathering more information, and possibly richer transcripts.

The participants in this study were a monolithic group as well; they were all white, heterosexual, married or previously married, and identified having the means to own and home or land. Because the participants were self-identified and reached out to the researcher, this piques further interest into other demographics. Do they not belong to the organizations who helped with recruitment? Did they not feel their stories worthwhile enough to share? Do they not see the hardships of their lives as key moments to building resilience because their communities have no choice but to be resilient? These are prompting questions that could certainly influence a follow-up study.

As the excerpts of this study would show, location, history, and personal connections all highly influenced the struggles of those who participated. These self-identified key life moments created foundations for their resilience to grow. As elaborated on by Laveretsky, "Understanding and enhancing resilience in later years of life is one strategy that has potential to assist individuals in achieving better coping abilities and discovering additional possibilities for attaining happiness" (2014). This does not only apply to the events of the last 2 years, but in the unknown events of the future. Considering specifically the narrative and story-based approach to interviews, it is our hope with this research that someone can expand on the topics at hand, considering the true influence that life moments have on one's outlook of the present and future.

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First, thank you to my storytellers. Thank you for your vulnerability, kindness, and insight. Learning from and serving older adults is my life's passion, so getting to sit with you was a breath of fresh air in the midst of these two years. The topic for this thesis was slightly selfish, as I needed to hear from those who've survived war and devastation that it's okay — we've survived worse, and somehow it's still worth it. Thank you for helping me build up my resilience with you.

Next, I extend my gratitude to the Institute on Aging at Portland State. I think often of that fateful meeting with Dr. Sarah Dys at LeadingAge in 2019. From there, I met Serena Hasworth, Sheryl Elliot, and my own thesis advisor, Dr. Paula Carder. If not for the kindness and professional support of these women, I don't know if I'd have had the courage and faith in myself to pursue this project. A very humble thank you also to the Better with Age Initiative, Keren Brown Wilson, and Michael DeShane for financially supporting this final push to finish my Bachelor's. Because of your contributions, I was able to finish my final year working in the field, rekindling the passion for seniors that my education has been dedicated to.

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I never thought I'd actually reach this end.

You are my resilience.

I hope I've made you proud.

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