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# Transcending Mortality: Existential Dynamics and Spiritual Resilience among Late-Life Beginners through the Sufi Ethics of Al-Ghazali's Ayyuhal Walad

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**Abstract**

Late-life learning is mostly described as cognitive and functional literacy and often overlooks the concerns that accompany aging and the anxious, restless spirit that may be present. This phenomenological research investigates the 'late-life beginners' of the Darusalam Mengaji community in Indonesia. In particular, it examines how these individuals psychologically address the social uncertainties of the aging process by internalizing the Sufi ethics of Al-Ghazali's *Ayyuhal Walad*. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), participants aged between 60 to 77 years were identified and interviewed in-depth. Findings indicated three transformative outcomes. First, participants experienced an awareness of the proximity of their own death, which was not a fear for them, but a motivational force for them to resist the social stigma that is generally associated with the aging process and *golek sangu* (spiritual preparation). Second, participants perceived the social construct of *qana'ah* (satisfaction) and *tawakkul* (trust) not as an imposition of social peace but as a transformation of the time left to them as equally a valuable and sacred opportunity for them. In conclusion, this research offers an innovative educational gerontology model based in Sufi ethics that provides a psychologically safe peer community within educational settings that encourages the integration of Sufi meaning-making for Ego Integrity and Gerotranscendence.

**Keywords**: Late-Life Beginners; Educational Gerontology; Existential Anxiety; Cognitive Reappraisal; Sufi Ethics

## Introduction

Celestial projections depict that by the next decade, one in six individuals in the world will be aged sixty and above. Among various multi-faceted psychological challenges (United Nations, 2024; World Health Organization, 2025), this presents the challenge of late death phase of life dialectical crises of the balance of the ego integrity and the despair (Erikson & Erikson, 1982).

According to the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 2021), once individuals attain old age, they begin the process of altering their goals. One such activity is the spiritual meaning. Most elderly individuals dedicate their resources and time to support their local community programs. One such program is the *Komunitas Darusalam Mengaji* (KDM) located in Bojonegoro and is a large scale, socio-religious ecosystem and community program comprising over four hundred elderly individuals. KDM is in contrast to other sectarian learning programs. Member groups of KDM are either ex-retirees or Traders, who embark along what



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is known as “radical learning trajectory,” as “*Lansia Pembelajar Pemula*” (Late-Life Beginners), and commence to learn religious literacy in an attempt to address their existential and death anxieties.

Previous studies on religious coping have consistently confirmed that religious practices are positively correlated with the mental health of older adults (Koenig, Harold G, VanderWeele, Tyler, Peteet, 2023; Pratama et al., 2025). However, the existing literature tends to be biased toward individuals with already established religious backgrounds. There is a significant gap concerning the psychological dynamics of “Lansia Pembelajar Pemula” (*Late-Life Beginners*), namely those who begin a serious spiritual journey in later life. This group faces dual challenges: natural cognitive decline and psychosocial barriers in the form of social shame resulting from their lack of literacy. Although Rothman & Coyle, (2018) have emphasized the need for psychotherapy models grounded in the structure of the Islamic soul, the specific exploration of how classical texts such as *Ayyuhal Walad* are internalized by novice elderly learners to overcome such stigma and anxiety remains limited in academic discourse.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the lived experiences of elderly individuals in KDM in reconstructing their identities. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate how the process of transformation occurs in individuals who begin learning from a zero baseline to the point of understanding advanced ethical teachings. The primary focus of this research is to examine how the internalization of the teachings in *Ayyuhal Walad* functions as an instrument for transforming anxiety about limited remaining lifespan into a form of mental strength. Thus, this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of how “Lansia Pembelajar Pemula” (*Late-Life Beginners*) reconcile their past and prepare for the end of life through practical Sufi education (*tasawuf*).

This study argues that *Ayyuhal Walad*, for novice elderly learners in KDM, does not merely function as a dogmatic text but operates as a mechanism of Cognitive Reappraisal (Abu-Raiya, 2012). We assume that specific narratives such as the “Eight Wisdoms of Hatim Al-Asham” provide a new cognitive framework that redefines the meaning of “true companionship” as righteous deeds (*amal saleh*) and “wealth” as *qana’ah*. This study proposes that the integration of Al-Ghazali’s Sufi ethical curriculum and the collective social support within KDM fosters a unique form of spiritual resilience. This enables the elderly to transcend the stigma of their lack of knowledge and transform their fear of death into acceptance and inner peace (Irawanto et al., 2011). In the context of this study, spiritual resilience is defined as the psychospiritual capacity of older adults to adaptively negotiate existential anxiety, combat social stigma, and manage late-life vulnerabilities through the active internalization of faith-based meaning-making and Sufi coping mechanisms.

**Literature Review**

This research study explores the integration of classical Islamic psychology (*tasawuf*) and contemporary gerontology. *Ayyuhal Walad*, the primary pedagogical text for KDM, and Al-Ghazali’s *Mizan al-Amal*, are the texts from which this research derives much of its content. Consequently, this framework presents the psychological profile of the older person as comprising three interrelated constructs that assist the social construction of the older person. These are the temporal reconfiguration of the older person’s self; the movement of the self of the older person from the realm of mental literacy to the world of the concrete; and the implementation of cognitive restructuring based on Sufi ethics (Vidadili, 2024). This framework fosters interdisciplinary collaboration to see functional psychological resilience in older people as the outcome of incorporating Sufi ethics.

The first dimension deals with the psychological need to reorient the self-concerning, the meaning of the passage of time, and the awareness of one's own death (*mortality salience*). Within Al-Ghazali’s psychological theory, time (*waqt*) is the substance of life and the entity that

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ultimately determines one's (*eschatological*) fate, as opposed to a mechanical, passive, and arbitrary segmentation of hours and minutes. Al-Ghazali (2014) uses shock existential therapy when he says that those over the age of 40 and who have not performed predominant good deeds should be prepared to face the consequences in the hereafter. This is closely related to the ontological construction in *Mizan al-Amal* where Al-Ghazali (2023) says that substantial transformation of the soul is a prerequisite for one to attain eternal happiness (*sa'ādah ukhrawiyah*). Death should not be seen as the threat of a biological occurrence, but a moment of a revealing (*kasyf*) that compels people to a severe and drastic *muhasabah* (self-accountability) while there is still worldly rationality.

Psychologically, this existential imperative advanced by Al-Ghazali has a great deal of correspondence with Carstensen's (2021) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST). According to SST, the case of older people is one in which the perception of future time becomes limited. As a result, the dominant motivation of older people tends to be the quest for emotional rather than intellectual meaning. In this sense, the anxiety of older people regarding the eventual death of the body is shifted by Sufi ethics to a preparation for the everlasting life of the soul. This is also consistent with Rothman & Coyle's (2018) concept of the integration of the Islamic self-structure, where the alignment of *nafs* (self/soul), '*aql* (intellect), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit) is necessary to attain existential peace in the later years of life.

The second dimension describes an axiological shift in which transcendence of cognitive religiosity (*'ilm*) is toward the transformation of concrete action (*'amal*). Al-Ghazali offers a strong critique of this epistemological gap as he gives the example of "the owner of ten swords who is still devoured by a lion because he does not use them." This image invites us to accept that just as the swords become useless to their owner as he does not put them to use, so too does the accumulation of religious literacy become vain without the internalization of moral values (Mohamed, 2023). This idea is crystallized through the mirror image in *Mizan al-Amal* as knowledge is merely placed as the instruction and is therefore the process of polishing the inner mirror which will reflect, on the exterior, the light of God (Al-Ghazali, 2023). To the elderly who are placed in the category of "*pembelajar pemula*" (late-life learners), this ethical principle is liberating, because their identity and spiritual worth are measured by their *tazkiyatun nufus* (purification of the soul) and not by their capacity of theological memorization. This is in line with the findings of Koenig (2020) and Hayward (2012), who found that intrinsic-practical religious coping is much more effective in reducing depression among the elderly than formal religious practice.

The third dimension applies cognitive restructuring by using the "Eight Wisdoms of Hatim Al-Asham" as a case study of emotional regulation for the elderly. This case study exemplifies a type of cognitive reappraisal mechanism whereby a person alters the way they view a specific situation that is stressful (Gross, 2015). This type of restructuring consists of three main redefinitions. *Social Support Reappraisal* is the first, in which the elderly person views the righteous deeds as the true and everlasting companion, and in doing so derives the sense of comfort and relief to the feeling of loneliness that has been haunting them as a result of the dying accompanied by the family. *Financial Reappraisal* is second and describes the situation where '*qana'ah*' and trusting the belief that sustenance (*rezeki*) will be provided leads to the absence of financial difficulties as well as to the absence of envy relative to the economic difficulties; *Financial Reappraisal* is third and describes the situation where the elderly person views the righteous deeds as the true and everlasting companion, and in doing so derives the sense of comfort and relief to the feeling of loneliness that has been haunting them as a result of the dying accompanied by the family (Rassool, 2024).

The final stage of cognitive restructuring and value shift is the phenomenon of Gerotranscendence in modern developmental psychology (Tornstam 1997). The combination of *qana'ah*, *tawakkul*, and the new framework of eschatological companionship is aimed at the

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elderly to give them the instruments to reconsider their biopsychosocial condition. The shift in metaperspective from an atheistic materialistic viewpoint to a cosmic perspective allows elderly people to reinterpret their physical and financial limitations. These limitations are not seen as a threat to an individual's autonomy and do not impact a person's existence negatively. In fact, they aid in achieving a calm acceptance of their new reality (Ahmad, 2026). The union of the three aforementioned concepts creates a strong basis from which the concept of spiritual resilience can be explored in vulnerable segments of the population.

## Method

### *Research Design*

This research adopts a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design (Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA focuses on sense-making, so the goal of this research goes beyond the description of a phenomenon and explores how people articulate meaning to their social and personal experiences. A main consideration when adopting a phenomenological approach is that the research does not describe an objective causal relationship. For instance, it is not the aim of this study to say that the text of *Ayyuhal Walad* mechanically results in the construction of resilience. The aim of this research is to explain how participants of the study recognize and regard the teachings from *Ayyuhal Walad* as one of the main sources of their psychological resilience. The aim of this study and the IPA in general is to identify the subjective meanings that participants have derived from their experiences, and of particular importance, to understand the instinctive psychological phenomenon of "*Lansia Pembelajar Pemula*" (Late-Life Beginners) in order to penetrate the participants' "*lifeworld*." This includes understanding how late-life beginners experience psychological distress and how they consider the teachings of *Ayyuhal Walad* to be a source of psychological resilience. IPA is fundamentally a double hermeneutic evaluation, and as such, describes how participants consider and explain their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

### *Location and Participants*

The venue for the research was at *Komunitas Darusalam Mengaji* (KDM), Bojonegoro, East Java. KDM is a community inclusive religious learning ecosystem that houses up to 500 senior citizens. Following the idiographic focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Creswell and Poth (2018) have suggested that participant selection should involve purposive sampling and homogenous sample population, which in this case, included individuals over 60, those who have begun Qur'anic literacy at KDM at the basic level (*Iqra'*/zero level), who have been participants of *Ayyuhal Walad* for a minimum of one year, and who were willing to share their spiritual journeys. Eight core participants were involved in this study. This number of participants, according to Smith et al. (2022), is as per IPA idiographic principles that endorse deep micro-analysis of individual participants' lived experiences, and that an analysis should as much as possible retain individual participant's diversity (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants comprised five females and three males, who were aged between 60 and 77 years. Five of the participants had a university degree (S1) and the other three had completed secondary school (SMA). Participants also had varied professions, which included retired civil servants, retired employees of state-owned enterprises, merchants, and housewives, which also illustrated vertical diversity.

### *Reflexivity and Positionality*

The main researcher has a personal belief in the educational and spiritual value of *Ayyuhal Walad*. This prior theological belief acted as a potential influence on interpretation that was bracketed continually through the use of reflexive journals, cooperative coding, and an active search for statements that disconfirm the researcher's own biases or preconceived notions. In

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addition, the interview guide was intentionally created to allow participants to discuss their negative experiences, feelings of frustration, and moments of doubt throughout the learning process (e.g., their struggle to learn how to recite the book correctly, as well as their ongoing concerns about their economic situation). This bracketing of the researcher's theological beliefs helped to ensure that all interpretations of the data were based solely on the participants' true and often contradictory lived experiences and not based upon the researcher's religious or spiritual beliefs.

The approach used in this collaborative research to ensure objectivity of data was a distancing strategy and investigator triangulation. Because the Principal Researcher is also an instructor of *Ayyuhal Walad* in the community, all qualitative interviews were conducted by Author 2 along with two trained research assistants who had no instructional, evaluative, or academic authority over any participants. As a strategy to minimize the social desirability bias and power imbalance in teacher-student relationships, this approach was implemented. As a Principal Researcher, you went from conceptual design to validation by coding collaboratively. These team discussions served as a checks-and-balances process in which the objective perspectives of the Co-Researchers were synthesized with contextual theological breadth (*insider knowledge*) of the Principal Researcher, prompting intersubjective interpretations.

*Data Collection and Language Validity*

Semi-structured in–depth interviews were carried out as a form of primary data collection focusing on the participants' personal experiences of anxiety, how the teachings of Hatim Al-Asham had been internalized from their land model to become absorbed within themselves, and what happened to their lives meaning battle. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, privately, and using the local language (Javanese *krama*/*ngoko*) to enable more authentic emotional expression because rasa is a concept many Javanese speakers find difficult to articulate precisely in formal Indonesian. Each session was audiotaped and the data were supported by field notes, screening tool assessments that lasted 60–90 min per participant. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored in encrypted digital storage which will only be accessed by the research team, and they will be deleted after five years. Data analysis was carried out exclusively on transcripts in the original language for semantic integrity, while translated English versions of quoted excerpts appearing in the final manuscript were produced utilising a back-translation method verified by bilingual language experts to avoid translation loss of theological and cultural nuances.

*Data Analysis, Rigor, and Ethics*

Data analysis was operationalised through five independent systematic stages of IPA (Smith et al., 2022) ranging from data immersion (*reading and re-reading*) to cross-case analysis (cross-case analysis). Rigour was established throughout the study via standards put forth by Lincoln, Yvonna S, Guba (1985) including member checking to validate findings with participants (*credibility*), and bracketing (*epoché*) through reflective journals completed by each member of the team (*reflexivity*). This study has been assessed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Tarbiyah, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sunan Giri (Approval Number: 228/SKet/FT/071088/IV/2026).

Human subject protection protocols were followed, including written informed consent, data anonymization using pseudonyms, and confidentiality. Additionally, participants were clearly logged that they had an absolute right to withdraw at any time from the interview or from the study as a whole without penalty or consequences. Due to the sensitive nature of death and existential anxiety, the principle of 'do no harm' was strictly upheld by introducing breaks whenever participants exhibited emotional distress.

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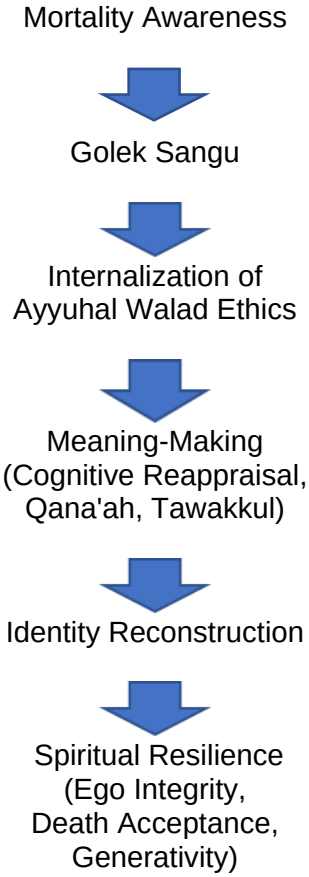
**A Conceptual Model : The Sufi Meaning-Making Model of Late-Life Spiritual Resilience**




The Sufi Meaning-Making Model of Late-Life Spiritual Resilience is represented by Figure 1. This model demonstrates how the transformation of elderly novice learners progresses through the KDM ecosystem. The data collected presents a process that generally starts from facing one's mortality as a result of existential shock or realization of time wasted to be the cultural basis of the "*golek sangu*" (seeking eschatological supports). The urgency of this event resulted in the participants having a deeper involvement with the Internalization (of the *Ayyuhal Walad* Code of Ethics) beyond textual reading and as an essential Meaning-Making function. Cognitive reappraisal of principles such as *qana'ah* and *tawakkul* as an approach to reduce economic stress and redefine the remaining lifespan was facilitated through the Meaning-Making process. This process of meaning-making appears to allow for an identity reconstruction that produces spiritual resilience exhibited by achieving ego integrity and assimilative death acceptance leading to generativity in one's later life.

**Result**

**Existential Dimension: Inner Struggle and Negotiation of Psychosocial Barriers**

Phenomenological research conducted with participants in *Komunitas Darusalam Mengaji* (KDM), revealed that for the late-life learner, their existential dimension is conditioned by a deep confrontation with the fact of death and the need to search for their provisions (*golek sangu*). The existential crisis often arises from events that provoke an individual's fundamental beliefs or meaning systems, otherwise referred to as a "crisis of meaning". One example is the case of Ibu Erawati S. (62 years old) who had a profound shock at the time of her sister's very sudden, and unexpected, death - approximately 11 years younger than Ibu Erawati - realizing that death could come any time and not just to those who are old. A crisis of meaning can also be a source of existential crises; for example, Bapak Samsi Arif (64 years old) was

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overwhelmed by the amount of time he had wasted (about 80 episodes) watching a drama series. As a result, Bapak Samsi Arif experienced such a profound sense of regret that he made some radical changes to his life, including deleting entertainment applications, in order to prevent him from wasting the little time he has left. Both of these types of experiences (*critical events*) reinforce the existential urgency of searching for eschatological provisions (*golek sangu*). Death, as a reality, brings with it a particular type of anxiety; not the fear of death itself (*biological*), but rather the fear of being unprepared for eschatological judgment. This phenomenon is articulated profoundly by Ibu Deri (62 years old): *"Kadang kalau malam memikirkan kematian, rasanya kosong. Takut bukan karena mati itu sendiri, tapi takut belum siap. Wong urip kebanyakan dihabiskan kanggo urusan dunya."* (Sometimes at night when I think about death, it feels empty. I'm afraid not because of death itself, but because I'm not ready. Life is mostly spent dealing with worldly matters).

For participants, death is accepted as a biological certainty; however, the quality of *sangu* (provisions) becomes the primary source of concern that drives radical behavioral change. Bapak Safron (70 years old) emphasized that his main focus is not the mystery of death, but the inventory of deeds: *"Yang saya khawatirkan itu kita mati bekal apa yang kita bawa... Jadi yang penting kita siap-siap aja."* (What I worry about is what provisions we bring when we die… So the important thing is just to be prepared). This anxiety manifests concretely in the fear of facing *sakaratul maut* (the moment of dying) without adequate spiritual literacy. Bapak Samsi Arif (64 years old) described it as follows: *"Kalau saya mati, belum bersiap apa-apa, belum bisa baca Al-Qur'an... jangan-jangan pas saya mau mati, nggak bisa baca itu."* (If I were to die, I haven't prepared anything, I still can't read the Qur'an… what if when I'm about to die, I'm unable to read it). This inner struggle drives sharp corrective actions, ranging from increasing worship routines—such as reciting *shalawat* 50 times after prayer—to radical self-control by deleting entertainment applications from mobile devices to minimize wasted time.

Besides internal barriers, participants faced external barriers in the form of social stigma that promotes an image that basic Qur'anic literacy is a children's domain which based on this narrative originated feelings of inferiority and social shame (Thah & Al-Awadhy, 2026). Yet, overcoming these psychosocial barriers required both a change in theological motivation and support from the KDM ecosystem. As Ibu Desi emphasized, malu before the public was unheeded, while malu in the presence of God overrode social validation: "*Malu itu ada, tapi tidak digubris; yang penting tidak malu di hadapan Tuhan*." (It is there shame but you leave it aside, the important thing is not to be ashamed before God.) Perhaps it is the age-homogeneous environment of KDM (60–77 years) that creates a sense of shared fate sensu Bartels et al., and provides the psychological safe space to deconstruct this shame. But two intertwined forces drive the deep appreciation that accompanies this transition from shame to pride. Deep down, the participants recognized that their fear of not having enough eschatological supply other spiritual sustenance in the hereafter far overrode their meaninglessness dread of human judgment. Extrinsically, this awareness is nurtured by the homogeneity of the peer group—learning with contemporaries leads to a strong sense of belonging—and supported by instructors who are empathetic and non-judging. This, in combination with the other components here cauterizes (*brandishes*) the participants sense of being less than others, converting social stigma into a badge of honour reflecting their enterprising spirit to learn nuanced skills later in life.

**Process and Cognitive Dimension: Mechanisms of Internalizing Sufi Ethics**

The phenomenological exploration of participants' cognitive mechanisms reveals how the text of *Ayyuhal Walad* is internalized and triggers a restructuring of their perspective on the dimension of time, particularly through the reinterpretation of remaining lifespan. Al-Ghazali's warning regarding the urgency of time for individuals who have surpassed the age of 40 acts as an existential shock that awakens participants' awareness. Although the initial narrative is marked by regret over the past (*past regret*), participants demonstrate the capacity to

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reconstruct the meaning of longevity not as a "delay," but as a divine grace and opportunity. This cognitive shift is paradigmatically represented by a 77-year-old participant (Bapak Safri), who articulated an inner resolution: *"Sing wes kliwat yo wis, saiki fokus sisan"* (What has passed, let it pass; now is the time to truly focus). This statement marks a demarcation point at which the past is fully accepted, and the present is positioned as a space for intensified spiritual engagement.

Awareness of the biological deadline is further articulated through a reorientation of priorities and a commitment to personal deeds. Bapak Samsi Arif interprets his age using the metaphor of a finish line: *"Kita sudah usia tua, sudah waktunya mau finish ini. Dengan kajian itu kita diingatkan lagi."* (We are already old; it's time to approach the finish line. Through these study sessions, we are reminded again). The awareness that he is approaching the finish line, along with the internalization of the teaching that family members only accompany one to the grave, directs his focus toward measurable investments in good deeds, such as maintaining consistency (*istiqamah*) in congregational prayers. A similar perspective is expressed by Bapak Safron, who treats his remaining time as an exclusive arena for religious activities, such as regularly attending *pengajian* (religious study gatherings) and *tahlil*. These narratives indicate that time is no longer experienced passively, but is proactively managed as a trust (*amanah*) that demands eschatological accountability at the end of life.

In responding to the dynamics of later life, participants operationalize the teachings of Hatim Al-Asham regarding the concepts of true companionship, *qana'ah*, and *tawakkul* to dematerialize wealth and negotiate economic anxiety (Amanda & Erwanto, 2026). Participants reconstruct the meaning of *rezeki* (sustenance) from a mathematical calculation into a qualitative understanding grounded in inner tranquility, as expressed by Ibu Denada: *"Dulu masih sering kepikiran soal rasa aman di hari tua. Sekarang jauh lebih tenang... Sing penting cukup lan ati tentrem."* (I used to often worry about security in old age. Now I feel much calmer… what matters is having enough and a peaceful heart). The practice of *qana'ah* functions as a restraint against consumptive impulses. Ibu Siti Arofah: *"Kalau tidak benar-benar butuh, saya tidak beli."* (If I don't truly need it, I don't buy it), while wealth is positioned merely as a trust from God. Nevertheless, human vulnerability and economic anxiety are still acknowledged. Participants such as Bapak Samsi Arif openly admit emotional fluctuations: *"Kadang pasrah, kadang kepikiran lagi."* (Sometimes I surrender, sometimes I start worrying again). This anxiety is not denied; rather, it is continuously managed and negotiated through an attitude of total surrender (*tawakkul*).

**Transformational Dimension (The Outcome): Identity Reconstruction and Spiritual Resilience**

In the context of this study, spiritual resilience is explicitly defined as the psychospiritual capacity of older adults to adaptively negotiate existential anxiety, combat age-related social stigma, and manage late-life vulnerabilities through the active internalization of faith-based meaning-making.The analysis of narratives from *lansia pembelajar pemula* (*late-life beginners*) in KDM indicates that this resilience manifests through the occurrence of profound inner transformation, emotional regulation, and a significant improvement in the quality of religious practice. Participants consistently reported a shift in psychological condition from initially reactive to more stable and peaceful, marked by a reduction in negative affects such as social jealousy (*hasad*). Somatic-psychological metaphors such as "Hati saya ayem, adem, seger" (Ibu Tardjah) and the attitude of *"kulo pasrah"* represent the release of worldly mental burdens. "Hati saya ayem, adem, seger" (My heart feels calm, cool, and refreshed). This inner tranquility is accompanied by a shift from minimalistic religiosity toward conscious and disciplined praxis. This is reflected in participants' increasing intellectual humility when receiving *tajwid* corrections—such as Bapak Samsi Arif, who independently strives to learn through YouTube—as well as remarkable achievements in consistently completing *khataman* (full recitations) of the Qur'an and maintaining *istiqamah* (steadfastness) in prayer.

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The peak of this transformational dimension is evident in participants' ability to reconcile with death, transforming it from a frightening threat into an adaptive state of spiritual readiness. The concept of *Husnul Khotimah* is redefined not merely as the condition at the moment of death, but as a life success that leaves behind a positive moral legacy for one's family (Khodijah & Monang, 2025). Death remains respected as a human reality, yet panic is replaced by peaceful acceptance. The capacity to coexist with the reality of death is poetically illustrated by Ibu Desi*: "Masih ada rasa takut, tapi takutnya nggak seperti dulu. Lebih banyak rasa siap... Rasane kaya wong sing wis rapi-rapi, mung ngenteni dipundhut"* (There is still fear, but it is not like before. There is more of a sense of readiness… It feels like someone who has already packed everything neatly, just waiting to be called). A similar affirmation is expressed by Ibu Siti Arofah, who peacefully views the grave as a "future home."

The spiritual transformation of KDM's elderly participants does not stop at achieving personal equilibrium, but extends into generativity and proactive social orientation. Their identities shift into *change agents* who carry collective responsibility (Zafari et al., 2023). This praxis is manifested in peer advocacy, where participants actively recruit other elderly individuals to learn *mengaji* (Qur'anic recitation) and deconstruct the stigma of "being too late to learn," as expressed in Ibu Deri's campaign: *"Wong sinau iku ora ana telate."* (There is no such thing as being too late to learn). Furthermore, personal piety transforms into social piety through intergenerational value transmission (advising children and grandchildren about the power of prayer), as well as the redefinition of *amal* (good deeds) beyond formal rituals—such as interpreting domestic work and interactions on social media (WhatsApp) as mediums for sharing wisdom and engaging in eschatological charity.

**Discussion**

In the end, this phenomenological study concludes that internalized Sufi ethics of Ayyuhal Walad performs as a potential psychologically transformative mechanism for "*lansia pembelajar pemula*" (late-life beginners). Results: Participants negotiated existential anxiety associated with death and age-related stigma through *golek sangu* (searching for eschatological provisions). By operationalizing the values of *qana'ah* (contentment) and *tawakkul* (surrender), participants effectively practice cognitive reappraisal to dematerialize economic anxiety and frame their remaining life span as an opportunity for spirituality. This dialectical process eventually allows the identity to be reconstructed as a whole, from emotionally vulnerable old men into active spiritual subjects who find inner-peace, adaptively accept death (approach acceptance), and expand social responsibility.

Such findings provide a psychological counterpoint to traditional gemitis for aging as automatically coupled with despair and mental inflexibility. Narrative of acceptance: "*Sing wes kliwat yo wis*" (What is past, let it go) and a metaphor for an already packed person (her name in Javanese; ) "*wong sing wis rapi-rapi*". This demonstrates the extraordinary cognitive flexibility of participants in processing existential shocks. Instead of getting caught in emotional repression or toxic positivity, participants deliberately engage an existential dialectic whereby they recognize human fragility and wavering anxieties surrounding aging, all the while continually traversing such fears with surrender to God. This reflection consolidates the thought process that *tasawuf amali* (practical Sufism), provided in a psychologically sound space backed by peer homogeneity, not only acts as religious literacy per se but also transmutes into an organic psychotherapeutic mechanism essential for providing psychological rehabilitation to the elderly.

In theory, participant resilience strategies can be understood in the context of convergence between Meaning Management Theory (Wong, 2013) and Gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1997). Movement through Tornstam's three dimensions of gerotranscendence among participants were noted. These individuals showed higher levels of self acceptance and lower

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levels of regret about their past when measured at the self dimension. At the social level, they transition away from ego-centric interests to generativity and intergenerational accountability. It was at the level of cosmic reality that death ceased to be seen as annihilation, and came to be understood as movement toward the divine reunion reflected in a description by participants of the grave as a future home, their sense of connection with transcendent reality increasing. Redefining *Husnul Khotimah* —the elderly participants in my study did not interpret this moment to be merely the time of dying, but rather an eschatological “life project”—is indeed a precise embodiment of acceptance (approach acceptance) because death is welcomed as a transitional gate that is prepped through the accumulation of good deeds. Moreover, limiting materialistic consumption and readjusting remaining time serves as an elevated version of Cognitive Reappraisal; the salience(1) of aging-related stressors are temporally re-contextualized into spiritual opportunities (Gross, 2015). The achievement of psychological balance: "*ati tentrem*" (calm heart). and probably intellectual humility to accept corrections during tajwid finally graduation the participants into Ego Integrity (Erikson & Erikson, 1982) from absolute fear transformed into wise spiritual preparedness.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the internalization of Ayyuhal Walad is not a linear, flawless process; it is marked by ongoing tensions and human vulnerabilities. Phenomenological data reveals that the participants did not magically eliminate all anxieties. For example, Ibu Tardjah (75 years old) openly admitted her emotional fragility, particularly after the loss of her husband, stating that her mental state was 'actually not strong' (mental saya sebenarnya tidak kuat). Furthermore, despite practicing qana'ah, Bapak Samsi Arif acknowledged an ongoing ambivalence regarding his financial security during retirement, admitting that he sometimes felt at peace, but at other times the worries returned ('kadang pasrah, kadang kepikiran lagi'). Intellectual tensions were also evident, such as when participants initially felt frustrated ('kok disalahkan terus') by continuous corrections to their Qur'anic recitation before developing intellectual humility. These contradictions demonstrate that spiritual resilience in this context does not mean the absolute absence of negative emotions, but rather the continuous, adaptive negotiation of these vulnerabilities through faith-based coping.

The interpretation of these phenomenological findings provides a strong empirical rebuttal to two dominant assumptions in mainstream psychological literature. First, these findings provide strong empirical support for Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al., 1986) within an Islamic-Sufi context. TMT postulates that mortality salience triggers the need for meaning systems and cultural worldviews to buffer against existential anxiety. In perfect alignment with this premise, the findings demonstrate that the elderly participants utilize the Sufi ethics of Ayyuhal Walad as a robust cultural worldview and meaning system. By internalizing these teachings, they effectively buffer their death anxiety and utilize mortality awareness as a catalyst for Positive Religious Coping to accelerate their spiritual practices (Pargament, 2001). Second, the expansion of participants’ social orientation radically deconstructs Disengagement Theory, which assumes that older adults naturally withdraw from social interaction (Cumming, E., & Henry, 1961). Rather than practicing *uzlah* (pathological social isolation), their peer advocacy and intergenerational value transmission demonstrate *Late-Life Generativity*, transforming alienation into spiritually grounded social engagement (*Spiritual Civic Engagement*).

The implications of this dialectic between *tasawuf* and gerontology underscore the urgency of integrating spiritual resilience values into the formulation of future Educational Gerontology policies. Institutions and communities supporting older adults need to replicate pedagogical models that transcend functional literacy toward the creation of meaning-making frameworks for navigating existential crises. Although this phenomenological approach successfully presents a rich and in-depth elderly lifeworld, the research locus centered on a single ethnically homogeneous community constitutes a limitation that constrains the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is strongly recommended to test the effectiveness

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of *Ayyuhal Walad* ethical interventions through quantitative experimental designs, or to replicate this qualitative study among elderly populations within more heterogeneous cultural and urban contexts in order to validate the universality of this spiritual resilience model on a global scale.

## Conclusion

This phenomenological study concludes that the internalization of the Sufi ethics of *Ayyuhal Walad* operates as a highly transformative psychological mechanism for "*lansia pembelajar pemula*" (*late-life beginners*). The main findings indicate that participants successfully negotiate existential anxiety related to death and age-related stigma through the cultural manifestation of *golek sangu* (seeking eschatological provisions). Through the operationalization of the values of *qana'ah* (contentment) and *tawakkul* (surrender), participants engage in effective cognitive reappraisal (*cognitive reappraisal*) to dematerialize economic anxiety and reframe their remaining lifespan as a spiritual opportunity. Ultimately, this dialectical process facilitates a holistic reconstruction of identity: from emotionally vulnerable elderly individuals into active spiritual subjects who attain inner peace, adaptive acceptance of death (*approach acceptance*), and a proactive expansion of social responsibility.

Theoretically, this study makes a significant scholarly contribution at the intersection of Existential Psychology, Gerontology, and *tasawuf*. The findings empirically support and extend Terror Management Theory (TMT) within an Islamic-Sufi framework. The study demonstrates that the mortality salience experienced by late-life beginners is effectively buffered by the internalization of Ayyuhal Walad, which functions as a powerful, religiously-grounded meaning system and cultural worldview. This dynamic process regulates existential anxiety into spiritual resilience through *Positive Religious Coping*. Furthermore, participants' social actions in peer advocacy offer evidence more consistent with active aging and gerotranscendence perspectives affirming that older adults can achieve Ego Integrity and Gerotranscendence through spiritually grounded social engagement (*Spiritual Civic Engagement*). This study offers a foundation for a new paradigm in Educational Gerontology, demonstrating that the integration of *tasawuf amali* and meaning-making within a psychologically safe learning ecosystem is far more impactful than approaches limited to cognitive literacy alone.

Although this phenomenological study presents a rich and in-depth lifeworld, the research locus - centered on a single culturally homogeneous (Javanese) community constitutes a natural limitation in terms of generalizability. Therefore, future research is strongly recommended to explore the dynamics of "*lansia pembelajar pemula*" within more heterogeneous urban demographics or in cross-cultural contexts (*cross-cultural studies*). In addition, studies employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches are recommended to measure the statistical significance of the effectiveness of *Ayyuhal Walad* text-based interventions in reducing geriatric depression and anxiety levels. Finally, longitudinal studies may be designed to observe the stability of spiritual resilience among older adults as they continue to experience the progressive decline of physical capacity over time.

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***Conflict of Interest Statement**: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*

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