



Old age and loneliness as a social problem

Loneliness among older persons – a study of different key-actors constructions of loneliness in later life

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Introduction

- The aim of this research project is to analyze how loneliness among older people is described, understood and communicated as a social problem by different key-actors in society
- Material from qualitative interviews, newspapers, policy documents and documents from organizations that describes visions for working with loneliness
- Interviews with representatives from The Red Cross, church, elderly care within a municipality, geriatricians, senior organizations, "visiting volunteers"

Introduction

- One part of the research project consists of analyzing how loneliness in later life is described, understood and communicated in Swedish media, mainly in newspapers.
- Emphasis is given to study *who's perspective on loneliness is dominating, if and why loneliness in later life is a problem, who has the responsibility of reducing loneliness, why older persons experience loneliness and what kind of solutions are promoted to reduce loneliness*

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- Loneliness as a phenomena has always been a central issue throughout the history of mankind
- The research on loneliness experienced a breakthrough with Robert Weiss publication *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation* (1973)
- Commonly used definition is that *social isolation* is the absence of a social network. *Emotional loneliness* lack of intimate relations (Weiss, 1973)

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- Litterature on loneliness consists of a wide variety of interrelated and overlapping concepts such as 'aloneness', "loneliness", 'solitude', 'living alone', 'isolation' and 'feeling lonely'.

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- Loneliness is embedded in given forms of social organization and cultural fabrics. Linguistic and cultural dimensions on loneliness important to consider
- Different social systems, cultures and languages may result in differences in how we feel and describe loneliness. Not all languages has an equivalent translation to "loneliness". (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010)
- Therefore, difficult to conduct international comparative studies

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- According to Robert Levy's (1973) ethnography of the Tahitians, there exist "no . . . terms for loneliness in the sense of being depressed or sad because of the lack of friends, companionship, and so on". (Peplau & Perlman 1982)

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- Although Levy notes that the lack of specific vocabulary does not mean that this state is unexpressible, themes of loneliness were nonetheless rare in his interviews. In contrast, Jean Briggs' (1970) portrait of Eskimo life suggests that the Eskimo have several different words for loneliness. (Peplau & Perlman 1982)

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- *“A stigma of failure and inadequacy is often attached by society to those who are brave enough to admit that they are indeed lonely”*
- We are unsure of ways to cope with others loneliness, as we are unsure of how to deal with our own. We are uncertain of the causes of loneliness as well as the consequences of it. This uncertainty and embarrassment may in part explain why there has been so little substantial investigation into loneliness. (Rokach, 2004)

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- We tend to identify it not with ourselves but with others, those that are considered marginal to the mainstream of our society, namely the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the handicapped, and the criminals—those we perceive as the ones who feel unwanted, unloved, and alienated. (Rokach, 2004)

Loneliness in later life - definitions, concepts and theories

- Loneliness and the relation to ageing. According to studies this relation varies. Studies by Tornstam reached the conclusion that younger adults experience loneliness to a higher degree than older people. (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010)
- How often older persons experience loneliness ranges from 4-50 % (Savikko, 2008).

Loneliness in later life - challenges in studying loneliness

- Difficult to "measure" loneliness as a persons feeling of loneliness can vary from one day to another
- Interview situation can be experienced as pleasant and therefore the feelings of loneliness can be less intense than in everyday life
- Larger population studies generally consists of one or few questions. How well do they capture complex experineces of loneliness?
- People are often reluctant to admit to feelings of loneliness as it is often perceived as an unwanted position with feelings of stigma and shame attached to this experience.



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Thank you!

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