

Older adults' experiences of being at a senior summer camp—A phenomenographic study

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Abstract

Senior summer camps are arranged by more and more municipalities in Sweden with the purpose of creating a place where older adults can meet and mitigate their social isolation. The aim of the study is to understand, from their own point of view, how the participants experienced senior summer camp. A phenomenographic approach was used to surface the older adults' experiences and analyze the data. Three descriptive categories evolved: "A pleasant environment to be in", "Something to do for everyone" and "Breaking one's loneliness". Findings from this study suggest that just getting away, not having to cook, seeing and experiencing something else, and having company when eating food or doing activities meant a lot to the participants, who all have different

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experiences of loneliness. Knowing that other people were lonely made the participants at the senior summer camp realize that they were not to blame for their loneliness.

Keywords

Ageing, gerontology, older adults, loneliness, senior summer camps

Introduction

In Sweden, efforts to address older people's isolation vary between different municipalities and are prioritized to varying extents. More and more municipalities are now arranging senior summer camps with the purpose of creating a place where older adults can meet and mitigate their social isolation. The history of senior summer camps in Sweden began in the late 1990s, when the first attempts to arrange such camps were made. Only a few studies on senior summer camps have been conducted: Nilsson et al. (2018) focus on the leaders of a summer camp; Park et al. (2017) study older adults with diabetes going on a senior summer camp; and Larsson et al. (2019) study older adults with various experiences of loneliness going on a senior summer camp. The common idea behind senior summer camps is that the participants are given the opportunity to socialize, and thus that the older adults' social isolation is to be mitigated. Summer camps in Sweden have been arranged by voluntary organizations and municipalities, and sometimes by both jointly. The summer camp also often includes planned activities in groups and free time (Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson et al., 2018).

Dealing with issues related to a growing number of older adults in the population is not unique to Sweden. The proportion of older adults in the world is estimated to increase further to 16 percent by 2050, meaning that it is expected that one in six people worldwide will be 65 years or older then (United Nations, 2020). Europe is the continent that has the oldest population. While action is being taken across Europe to address social isolation and loneliness, there is varying evidence on the effectiveness of measures, and projects are often poorly evaluated (Nilsson et al., 2018). However, as Marczak et al. (2019) suggest, much can be done to promote social integration and improve the quality of life for older adults. As Ferreira-Alves et al. (2014) point out, it makes no sense to construe age as a singular feature or cause for feelings of loneliness. Hence, age and several other features need to be addressed together to predict feelings of loneliness. Older adults' own experiences of loneliness and its complexity are described in a study by Larsson et al. (2019). The authors conclude that loneliness is a multifaceted phenomenon associated with both personal circumstances and social situations. The complexity of loneliness was also a finding in the study by Ferreira-Alves et al. (2014), who found that even if they could identify some predictor variables, there

was substantial variance left unexplained. They conclude that it is necessary to continue exploring how feelings of loneliness arise and how they can be changed (Ferreira-Alves et al., 2014). Agren and Cedersund (2018) suggest that loneliness among older people often is discussed from an outsider's perspective. Hence, there is a need for more research on the experience of loneliness from the point of view of older people themselves. Furthermore, this study is motivated by a need to explore how interventions such as senior summer camps can contribute to changing, addressing and understanding feelings of loneliness. It is also motivated by the need for knowledge exchange where gerontological social workers can gain experience from projects to reduce loneliness for older people carried out elsewhere. This article builds on a larger project evaluating a senior summer camp for older adults in the summer of 2017.

Aim

The aim of the study is to understand, from their own point of view, how the participants experienced senior summer camp.

Method

A qualitative method with a phenomenographic approach was chosen to surface the experiences of older adults attending a senior summer camp. Phenomenographic studies aim to identify the different ways in which human beings perceive, understand and experience the phenomena in the world around them (Marton, 1981, 1992, 1994). Conceptions based on individual interviews are central, but the result is a description on the collective level in the form of distinct descriptive categories that capture variation among individuals (Marton, 1996; Marton and Booth, 1997). Phenomenography differentiates between the first-order perspective, what something is, and the second-order perspective, how something is perceived. The essential factor in phenomenography is the second-order perspective (Marton and Booth, 1997). Phenomenography is similar to phenomenology, as both for instance focus on human experience and awareness. But there are also important differences (Marton, 1994), as phenomenology is concerned with philosophy and/or methodology and focuses on the essence of human experience, while phenomenography is substance-oriented and seeks to understand, characterize, describe, and conceptualize the variation of human beings' conceptions (Marton, 1994).

Participants

The selection criteria were that the participants had to have participated in a senior summer camp arranged in 2017, be over 65 years in age, have experience of loneliness, and experience difficulties in making new contacts. The selection was purposeful in that it was guided by the desire to find informants with different experiences. This project follows the Swedish Research Council's principles for

research ethics and the guidelines for good research practice (The Swedish Research Council, 2017) as well as the European Code for the Integrity of Research (ALLEA, 2017). This means, among other things, that participants are informed about the purpose of the study, that they give their consent to participate, and that they are informed that they can withdraw their participation at any time before the results are published. Recorded interviews, transcribed material and any information that can reveal the identity of the participants are stored and handled in such a way that unauthorized persons cannot obtain the material. Furthermore, the interviewees are informed that all information that emerges during the interviews will be handled with the greatest possible confidentiality. Thus, the names of the interviewees and names that are mentioned in their interviews, such as names of towns, relatives or others, have been removed or replaced with pseudonyms. The project also follows the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regarding the processing of personal data.

In the recruitment process, an information letter was sent to the participants explaining the purpose and approach of the study. A consent form was also sent along with the information letter. After a few days, one of the researchers called the older adults to give more information about the study, to ask whether they were willing to take part, and if so, determine the time and place for the interview. Twenty older adults were asked, of which one declined. Thus, the sample came to consist of 19 older adults differing in age (66–94 years), sex, and living arrangements (Table 1). All participants were legally competent to give their consent. The study was approved by the Regional ethics committee in Uppsala (diary number: 17RS4499).

Senior summer camp

All the participants in this study had been to the same senior summer camp. The target group for the summer camp were older adults who felt that they were lonely and had limited social interaction. The participants had to be able to manage on their own without the help of home care services. The participants also had to have an interest in meeting other people, which in the long run could lead to an extension of their social network. The summer camp aimed to give the participants the opportunity to meet new people, make new social contacts and participate in joint activities.

The summer camp offered two periods of stay in the summer of 2017. There was room for 20 people on each occasion, a total of 40 people. Two employees from the municipality were responsible for the summer camp and were present the whole period. There were also volunteers at the senior summer camp – two that were there for the first half, and two that were there for the second half. The summer camp included accommodation, a breakfast buffet, morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea buffet, and dinner, as well as a round-trip bus transportation for participants. Every day the opportunity was given to participate in several activities, such as boules games, walks, gymnastics, and excursions to the surrounding area.

Table 1. Information about the informants.

Interview person (IP)	Age	Sex	Living arrangements
IP1	74	Male	Lives together with IP9
IP2	84	Female	Lives alone
IP3	94	Female	Lives alone
IP4	82	Male	Lives alone
IP5	90	Male	Lives alone, wife is in a assisted living for people with dementia
IP6	84	Female	Lives together with her husband
IP7	72	Female	Lives with her husband
IP8	76	Female	Lives alone
IP9	76	Female	Lives together with IP1
IP10	87	Female	Lives alone
IP11	84	Female	Lives alone
IP12	77	Female	Lives alone
IP13	83	Female	Lives alone
IP14	80	Female	Lives alone
IP15	66	Female	Lives alone
IP16	93	Female	Lives alone
IP17	87	Female	Lives alone
IP18	74	Female	Lives alone
IP19	86	Male	Lives alone

In addition, there was a program of “mini-lectures” in the areas of health and quality of life. A reunion was held with each group in early autumn 2017. The purpose of the reunion was to further strengthen the established contacts and to allow the participants to share their experiences with each other. At the reunion, coffee was served and a slideshow of the various events that took place at the summer camp was shown while the participants could socialize with one another. Everyone got a USB stick with the slideshow so they could also watch it at home.

Data collection

The interview questions were developed by all the authors. The main question was: How did you experience your stay at the senior summer camp? Follow-up questions were asked depending on how the participants answered the main question. The follow-up questions were: “Can you explain?”, “Can you tell me more?”, “What do you mean?”, “Is there anymore you want to say, anything I haven’t asked you about?” The interviews were conducted by one of the authors (KL), a social worker with experience of qualitative interviews. The interviews were carried out in the participants’ homes, except for three that were conducted at the researcher’s workplace. Before the interview started the participants received

information about the study and filled out a consent form. The interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Phenomenographic analysis is directed toward similarities and differences between the individual statements. From this, conceptions surface, which are grouped into clearly defined descriptive categories (Marton, 1994). Our analysis was carried out manually to enable greater familiarity and intimacy with the data. It was conducted in four phases as follows (Marton, 1994; Marton et al., 1993): In the first phase, the audio-tape was listened to alongside the transcribed text in order to detect any possible inaccuracies during transcription. Thereafter the whole text was read several times with an open mind to become familiar with the data. Following these readings, notes were taken and statements relevant to the aim of the study were identified.

In the second phase, the interviews were seen as forming a “pool of meaning”. This phase consisted of identifying variation (similarities and differences) between the ways the informants described the phenomenon. Distinct statements were labeled and from these labels preliminary conceptions were formed.

In the third phase, to obtain an overall map of how these similarities and differences could be linked, the conceptions were compared with one another so as to choose the appropriate group and develop mutually exclusive groups of conceptions. Preliminary descriptive categories were identified and named.

In the fourth phase, the focus was on the relations between the preliminary descriptive categories (Marton, 1994). These descriptive categories were critically scrutinized in order to check that they were in agreement with and represented by the conception. Finally, through the interaction between the parts and the whole, three descriptive categories emerged as the main findings, capturing the variation in how the stay at the senior summer camp was experienced, conceptualized and understood. There was a constant interplay between the different phases of the analysis and the descriptive categories and conceptions were thoroughly discussed among the researchers. Hence, this was an iterative approach involving the whole research team as also described by Bruce et al. (2004). The findings are presented in a horizontally structured outcome space (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive categories and conceptions.

Descriptive categories	A pleasant environment to be in		Something to do for everyone	Breaking one's loneliness	
Conceptions	A welcome change	Encountering competent staff	Joining arranged activities	Understanding oneself through others	Making friends

Findings

Three descriptive categories and five conceptions evolved relating to how the participants experienced the senior summer camp (see Table 2). In order to illustrate the findings, the conceptions are exemplified with quotations from the interviews.

A pleasant environment to be in

This descriptive category brings together two conceptions of the participants' experiences at the senior summer camp, namely "A welcome change" and "Encountering competent staff".

A welcome change. Just the change of scenery and finally being able to go somewhere else was described as highly valued by the participants. Being at an old spa resort with interesting cultural buildings was also appreciated, and many of them had been there earlier in life or even in their childhood. Participants explained how being at senior summer camp gave them a chance to escape boredom and forget their worries for a while. To stay at such a luxury venue was experienced as a privilege and something different.

The whole environment there and all the happy people and... It was different as well. You need to experience different things like this sometimes, don't you? Not the usual where you go on vacation, but this was very special, unique... Well, it was very valuable... You cut off boredom and everything and... Worries and whatnot... You did not have time to think about anything. You could just help yourself... Accept it, that is. It was really really good! Really useful! (Interview 16)

For some of the participants the stay at the summer camp exceeded previous experiences in life, claiming that they never have had such a meaningful week. The stay at the senior summer camp also offered beautiful nature experiences that were appreciated by the participants. Some emphasized that it was a unique experience to participate in the senior summer camp, as it was a break from everyday life. The venue itself, with the cultural history and the closeness to beautiful nature, was put forward as a positive aspect along with the chance to meet others in the same situation and socialize with them.

One negative conception about the venue of the senior summer camp was that the outside as well as the inside environment was not disability friendly.

What was negative was that the houses we lived in were cultural buildings. It was very nice, but it was not disability friendly. There were gravel roads and it was difficult to get around. Indoors it was great, with the exception that the thresholds were high, the hotel rooms were nice, clean and tidy and double rooms although we were one person in each

room. Shower and toilet in each room. The rooms were far away from the dining room. (Interview 8)

Even though it was difficult in the beginning to have to walk the distance between the different buildings, participants also noticed improvement in their mobility and fitness, which was a positive experience.

These walks we went on every day. At first, I thought it was a little difficult. It was good exercise at the same time because it was a lot of gravel to walk on. But we got some exercise and it was nothing that deterred me then. (Interview 6)

The participants described in one way or another also how the meals, such as dinner, lunch and coffee, were an important part of their experience. Most of them complimented the chefs and expressed how good the food tasted.

Yes you have to say that with the food, yes it has been... Well it is impossible to describe, it was fantastic! The chefs knew what they were doing. This food, we just enjoyed every meal! It was good food every day. (Interview 11)

However, not only did the food taste good, it was also the luxury of not having to cook the meals themselves or even clean the tables that contributed to the experience of luxury. The participants appreciated being looked after by the restaurant staff. At each meal, the chef presented the food that was being served. That the food would be so tasty and that they did not have to help with the food, or with setting or clearing the table, was unexpected.

That you sat down at the set table and you were served the food and you could get up afterwards and the plate was left and you didn't have to do anything. I did not expect that because I thought it would be a little more that you had to help with the food. (Interview 8)

It was a lot of food. Well there was breakfast. Then there was morning coffee, then there was lunch, then there was afternoon coffee, then there was dinner. You understand how busy we were. You know those goodies that were there in the afternoons, you couldn't help eating them. No. Although I try not to take ... Take of each kind but maybe just one kind and then some fruit instead. (Interview 11)

In that way, even if the food was served too often, the participants described that it also gave them the opportunity to be social.

Having company when eating. Here you're on your own every day. It meant an awful lot, when you're on your own, to have different people around you. We talked and it was so cozy. It gave me a lot. (Interview 16)

Occasionally, some participants chose not to join for coffee and went out for a walk instead and were social in that way, while others could go for coffee and then find someone to talk to.

Encountering competent staff. The participants perceived that the care staff was fantastic and positive, and helped to create the best possible conditions for them. Overall, the participants experienced being safe and well cared for during the summer camp. Many of the participants were thus impressed by how dedicated the care staff were and how much energy they must have spent on planning all activities.

It was fantastic altogether. The staff were so engaged. When you needed help, you got it before you knew it. They kept us going all the time and there were activities, no one would be left out so to speak. I'm not used to being so well cared for. (Interview 14)

The participants experienced the staff as caring, and during the activities they and the volunteers made sure that no one would be left out. The volunteers also made sure to rotate the participants so they were not with the same people all the time, the intention being that all the participants would get to know one another. The participants described that the volunteers worked from early morning to late evening, assisting with everything the participants needed help with.

The staff were very energetic and diligent those girls, you have to say. They were very brisk. It was hard for them because it went on from early mornings to late evenings. (Interview 7)

The participants emphasized that the volunteers took good care of them. However, some participants also experienced that it was hard when the volunteers left after half the week was over and new volunteers came to the senior summer camp. These participants felt that it would have been better if the same volunteers had been present all the time.

The participants seem to think that in many ways the care staff went the extra mile to make the stay as pleasant as possible. The care staff were focused on making sure that everyone enjoyed themselves and they made every effort to meet the needs and wishes of the participants. The care staff and volunteers created a good atmosphere at the senior summer camp.

Yes, they were very nice. And they did their utmost. Absolutely. They were really there for you, I have to say. They drove the car and gave us a ride whenever there was anything. (Interview 19)

Overall, the participants seem to experience the care staff and the volunteers as very committed, service-minded and competent.

Something to do for everyone

This descriptive category includes one conception, namely “Joining activities”, illustrating the experience of participating in arranged activities and also taking the initiative to arrange activities themselves.

Joining activities. The participants describe that there was a range of activities that one could join all day. The arranged activities included a music quiz, reading aloud, musical performances, quiz walks, painting, playing boules, and playing golf, to mention but a few. Every morning the participants could also join some form of gymnastics like Qigong. Even though there were a lot of activities offered, the participants did not seem to think that it was stressful. It was very clear that participation in activities was voluntary.

There were activities all day, almost no free time. It was fantastic and well-arranged. We had walks every day. It was breakfast, gymnastics, and then there was always a lecture. . . . You joined in when you wanted to, and if not you let it be. The orchestra played and then we went on grötlunken [the “porridge walk”, a tradition at old Swedish spa resorts to take a slow walk after supper]. (Interview 7)

Being able to come down to the lake, go swimming and sunbathing were highly valued. Even if it was too cold for most of the participants to go for a swim, just sitting down and looking at the water and reflecting was restful and healing, some of the participants said.

We went down to [name of lake] and there was someone who went swimming, an older lady. It was 16 degrees in the water and she was swimming out there. . . . (Interview 19)

By the lake there was a wood-fired hot tub which was described as very much appreciated by the participants. Many also talked about the possibility of getting a lift from a golf cart. It was a short walk to get down to the beach, but the resort had a golf cart that drove guests around the area and down to the beach. Riding with the golf cart was experienced as fun and it also gave the participants who had difficulties walking an opportunity to see the nature around the old spa resort.

Riding with the golf cart outside the area, that was fun, to come out and see the rest of the resort. (Interview 9)

The participants described that it was a good balance between recreational activities and activities with a more informative purpose. The informational activities included lectures on dental care and hearing. After the lectures, the participants could test their eyesight and hearing. There was also a display of different assisting devices. In addition, information was given on where assisting devices

were available and how to go about asking for home care services if you need to seek help from the municipality. These more informative activities were highly appreciated by the participants, even if they had heard some of the information before.

But then we had a day when we got to look at different assisting devices. Then there was a day on vision and hearing, and they came from the dental office and talked about [being] dry in the mouth. And then there was a doctor from the audiologist's that gave a lecture as well, that was good I guess. His lecture in particular was good. But the other things I have kind of heard before. But there was nothing wrong with hearing it anyway. (Interview 5)

A few informants wished that there would have been more activities or that they missed some activities that were not arranged.

I missed having a little more to do. There was gymnastics but there could have been a bit more of that. I love nature and would have liked more forest walks. I wanted to exercise more. (Interview 11)

Even though there was a range of activities that the participants could join during the days, several of them also described taking their own initiative to socialize during the evenings.

We came up with things to do in the evenings, played cards and sat and talked and it got late sometimes, until nine or ten o'clock in the evening. I think it is important to sit down and talk and get to know each other. (Interview 12)

Playing cards was an activity that the participants themselves took the initiative to do. Others went out for a walk in the forest.

Breaking one's loneliness

This descriptive category brings together two conceptions, namely "Understanding oneself through others" and "Making friends", illustrating how the informants experienced that the stay at the senior summer camp helped to break their loneliness.

Understanding oneself through others. Knowing that one is not alone in feeling lonely became an important realization that participants had during the senior summer camp. Thus, a question that many of the participants had in mind was whether their loneliness was their own fault. That is, thinking that perhaps they were not good enough or nice persons to socialize with, that they might deserve being alone. Being at the senior summer camp made the

participants understand that feeling lonely in life does not have to do with them not being likable persons.

It felt so good there, I think it has a bit to do with being lonely. Every single door is closed out here in the stairwell. [I] have no contact with anyone. It is an association that could have a sense of community—we do have cleaning days. I don't have anyone I know here, [I] don't know if there's anything wrong with me or... (Interview 9)

There was time to reflect upon and talk about one's loneliness, and knowing that all the participants were there because they felt lonely also raised the spirit, making sure no one would feel left out. Realizing that it is no one's fault that some people feel lonely was described as an eye opener by many of the participants:

I felt that I could be myself, dare to believe in myself and not have to be someone else. (Interview 16).

The experience of being at a senior summer camp was described by some participants as nourishment for the soul. It strengthened their self-confidence and the participants had the courage to be themselves.

Making friends. The participants described that a positive aspect of being in a large group at the senior summer camp was that no one was alone, and everyone became important.

We were in a context and there wasn't anyone on their own, but we were a group. It's like you feel appreciated when you are in a context like that. (Interview 9)

Several participants expressed that because everyone was important for the group, the participants also felt appreciated. The participants described that the activities were designed in such a way that everyone was given an assignment so that they would contribute to the group. Whenever somebody could not do what they were expected to, they got help from others so that everyone would succeed. It was not only the care staff and the volunteers that assisted those with limited mobility, but the participants also helped each other.

Furthermore, most of the informants described that a nice friendship developed between the participants.

It was an experience, partly the place we were at but above all the community. It was very uplifting, and everyone was happy and pleasant. When you are happy you show a good side. (Interview 6)

Being in a community and feeling solidarity with the other participants contributed to making them feel much happier than they had been for a long time.

It was good to meet new people . . . To come on vacation and be with people all the time and not have to sit alone, I appreciate that. You are very lonely, and especially on the weekends. (Interview 11)

They appreciate meeting new people at the senior summer camp, belonging to a context and being part of a community, but also being on a retreat away from a lonely everyday life.

Discussion

Through older adults' descriptions of their experiences of attending a senior summer camp, this study has revealed three descriptive categories: "A pleasant environment to be in", "Something to do for everyone" and "Breaking one's loneliness".

Insights in the descriptive category "A pleasant environment to be in" suggest that the environment where the senior summer camp was arranged is important for several reasons. Being in a beautiful setting gave the participants a feeling of being on a luxury holiday. In this regard it is vital to point out that the setting and accommodation of the senior summer camp were described here as not disability friendly, which could cause some problems for the participants, even though all were rather mobile. This means that older adults who have more comprehensive physical difficulties could not participate, even though they might be the ones in greatest need of getting away for a retreat and breaking their loneliness. Hence an implication is that senior summer camps should be held at venues with accommodation that is accessible for older adults with minor and/or more comprehensive disabilities. However, several studies (cf. Burholt and Scharf, 2014; Gitlin et al., 2013) have suggested that feelings of loneliness can contribute to "sitting at home", which can have consequences in terms of health and fitness. Therefore, staying in a somewhat challenging environment also meant that the participants got exercise and could be surprised that their mobility and fitness had improved during the stay. An important implication is that while the older adults can experience a non-disability friendly environment as challenging, this challenge can mean that participants are surprised by what they themselves can manage. Providing opportunities for physical activity and exercise in everyday life has been shown by Kahlbaugh et al. (2011) to be important for older adults' wellbeing, thus it is also clearly an important part of the senior summer camp. Furthermore, when a senior summer camp offers inspiration on how to be physically active and how to exercise, this might contribute to staying active when returning home.

The many occasions for eating food in our study were described as being too many by some, but even so, they were very much appreciated. It gave the participants a sense of luxury, as one may expect when going away for a retreat.

The participants of the senior summer camp who emphasized that it was too much food did not say so in a negative way. Rather, it was more of an expression of gratitude that someone wants to give them this extravagance, something the participants have not experienced in a long time. Our findings suggest that just being away from home, being somewhere else besides the four walls of one's home, meant a lot to the participants. From that perspective, senior summer camps might also be a good way of combating both the experiences of existential loneliness (such as isolation, alienation, emptiness and a feeling of being abandoned) and circumstances in which existential loneliness arises (when perceiving oneself as disconnected from others) that Bolmsjö et al. (2019) identify in their literature review. As pointed out by Bolmsjö et al. (2019), existential loneliness also seems to be connected to a feeling of meaningless waiting. Being at a senior summer camp might thus ease that feeling of waiting for life to end, and instead give life new meaning. Therefore, it is important to consider making the senior summer camp a recurring event to give the participants something to look forward to, so that the waiting might not be meaningless. From this perspective, it is of interest to note that restricted freedom due to physical difficulties also contributes to existential loneliness (Bolmsjö et al., 2019).

The older adults in this study also mentioned how much they appreciated the staff at the senior summer camp, and it was expressed by some that the staff went the extra mile to take care of them. Some had worried about managing at the senior summer camp, but overall the common experience seems to be that everyone got the help needed. One practical implication, however, is that continuity is important, i.e., that staff do not leave after half the time as was the case with the volunteers. The findings in this study indicate that it is not only the older participants who become close to one another, but the staff also becomes a part of the community. However, this result might not be surprising as there is a consensus in the literature that positive relationships between older adults and those who care for them are built on mutual trust, understanding, and sharing of collective knowledge (cf. Gharibian Adra et al., 2019; Teófilo et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2009).

In the descriptive category "Something to do for everyone", findings imply that it was important to have an array of activities so that there was something to do for everyone. Our findings in this regard resonate well with what Kahlbaugh et al. (2011) found in their study on older adults playing Wii, namely that activity in relation to social connection and enjoyment leads to less loneliness and a more positive mood compared to being social with others without doing any activity. In this respect, the activities that were offered promoted new bonds of friendship. However, while the activities that took place on the participants' own initiative seem to be the ones that were most important in making new friends, these activities also created feelings of loneliness for those who were not invited. Hence, an important implication for gerontological social workers arranging senior summer camps might be to be observant of whether anyone is left out. Perhaps there should be alternative evening activities for those who do not find friends at once. At the

same time, it is a difficult balance, since taking the initiative for one's own activities is a very valuable experience for those who make new friends that way. Findings in this study suggest that arranged activities play an important role in making everyone feel valuable and that they are a part of the group.

Findings from the descriptive category "Breaking one's loneliness" suggest that the participants at the senior summer camp found it liberating to realize that they were not alone in feeling lonely. This can be interpreted as meaning that the participants previously felt ashamed of their loneliness. Dahlberg's (2007) study alludes to this aspect of loneliness in terms of a deficit one is ashamed of. Furthermore, Cohen-Mansfield et al. (2016) found in their study that feeling ashamed of one's loneliness further contributes to older adults becoming more isolated. As such, one important implication is that feelings of shame along with feelings of loneliness need to be addressed during senior summer camps as part of the older adults being able to change their situation and being able to get away from negative feelings about themselves. Thus, being with others was what the participants highlighted as the very best part of the senior summer camp, not just because of the possibility of making friends but also because it meant that you were not alone in feeling lonely. Knowing that other nice people were lonely made the participants at the senior summer camp realize that it was no one's fault that they were lonely. Hence, the overall findings from this study suggest that just getting away, not having to cook, seeing and experiencing something else, and having company when eating food or doing activities meant a lot to the participants who experience loneliness in different ways.

Study strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is that older adults themselves talk about their own experiences, and it is evident that senior summer camps can be one important intervention that makes it possible to mitigate older people's isolation and loneliness. A limitation is that the study only includes four men, on the other side very few men applied and finally participated at the senior summer camp. This is unfortunate, since Milligan et al. (2015) suggest that older men might be particularly vulnerable to becoming lonely. A more even gender balance in this study would however have been desirable.

Conclusions

Understanding how the participants experienced the senior summer camp gives valuable insights into what the participants thought was good and what they thought could be better. Engaging in arranged activities and taking meals together are important aspects of helping the participants bond with one another. Activities that were arranged by the participants themselves, such as a game of cards after dinner, were appreciated by those who participated. However, these activities could also make others feel left out. It is important for staff at senior summer

camps to make sure no one is feeling left out and thus perhaps offer other activities. It is equally important for staff to acknowledge that some participants also need to be alone; hence it is a matter of finding a balance between offering activities and giving participants space when needed. The staff itself became an important part of the community. In a way, it seems like just getting away and experiencing what many of us take for granted that a holiday should include, i.e., good food and relaxation, made the participants feel that they were valued. Furthermore, for the participants, meeting others in the same situation led to the important realization that they were not alone in feeling lonely.

Implications

This study presents some insights of clinical importance that will be useful for gerontological social workers, staff, management, and politicians who want to implement an intervention similar to the senior summer camp. When developing an intervention, it is always important to consider and highlight the voices of those affected by it. This study thus makes an important contribution, as the voices of the older adults who participated in the intervention, i.e., senior summer camp, are heard. Some implications are that there should be continuity among the staff, that there should be a variety of activities offered, and, most importantly, that the senior summer camp could be a recurring event so that it is something to look forward to for older adults who feel lonely.

Future research

There is more research needed about older adults' experiences after participating in a senior summer camp. Only a few studies within social work use a phenomenographic approach (see, for example, Avby et al., 2014; Kvarnström et al., 2012a, 2012b; Nordesjö, 2020; Taylor, 2017, 2019). There is great potential for more studies in social work to use a phenomenographic approach and to thereby provide a strong message from the point of view of the people experiencing the phenomenon.


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