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“You Never Get Used to Loneliness” – Older Adults’ Experiences of Loneliness When Applying for Going on a Senior Summer Camp

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was explore why the informants were feeling lonely and considered themselves to be in need of attending a senior summer camp, and how the informants were experiencing loneliness before they went to the senior summer camp. Interviews was made with nineteen older adult people (15 women and 4 men). A phenomenological inspired approach was used for the analysis of the interviews. Eight themes resulted: Hard to make new friends, Other circumstances making it hard to be social, Feel very lonely even if they lead rich social lives, Loss of loved ones, Do not want to do things alone, Friends make a difference, Do not feel lonely but need a change and Loneliness occurs at certain times. Through this analysis, we have gain insights to better understand loneliness as a multifaceted phenomenon that is associated with both personal circumstances and social situations. Many of the informants experienced being very lonely, even if they lead rich social lives. The experience of loneliness was connected to not having anyone they can turn to in confidence or to share experiences with and the need to belong to something or the need of a change in everyday life.

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Introduction

There is no common definition of the concept of loneliness. Put simply, loneliness can be described as a subjective feeling that can be experienced as both positive and negative. Loneliness is, however, not synonymous with social isolation. Loneliness refers to more subjective feelings of being separated from other people, whereas social isolation refers to objective physical separation from others (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). Social isolation does not automatically lead to negative feelings of loneliness; however, the risk of experiencing loneliness as negative is connected to the loss of social contacts. Older adults as a group are seen as potentially in danger of losing both social

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contacts and abilities, and are as such more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness as negative. Earlier research on loneliness in Western countries has shown that twenty to forty percent of older adults reported feeling lonely (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkälä, 2005; Theeke, 2009).

Loneliness is seen as a risk factor for decreased physical and mental health, and is increasing among older adults in Sweden (Öhman & Abrahamsson, 2017). In a report by The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2018), it was estimated that one in ten older adults in Sweden experiences severe anxiety, and that fifteen percent often feel lonely. In health research, loneliness has been shown to be linked to increasing depressive symptoms, sleep disturbance, and cardiovascular illness (Dykstra, van Tilburg, & de Jong Gierveld, 2005; Ekwall, Sivberg, & Hallberg, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Victor, Scambler, Bowling, & Bond, 2005). Other risk factors that can lead to loneliness are poor quality of life, social isolation, loss of independence, frailty, and cognitive impairment (Burholt & Scharf, 2014; Gitlin, Szanton, & Hodgson, 2013). Loneliness among older people has become an important concern in Sweden. Ågren and Cedersund (2018) argue 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 adult people themselves, and on the causes of experiences of loneliness.

Background

According to the Swedish Social Services Act (2001:453), "all older adults should have an active and meaningful life in community with others". The meaning of this legal text is that every municipality has an obligation to ensure that older persons should not be alone against their own will. However, efforts to break older people's isolation vary between different municipalities and are prioritized to varying extents. The emphasis on activity in the Swedish Social Services Act also says something about which perspective is dominant in Swedish elderly care. The idea that activity is good for older adult people has been central in social gerontology since the 1940s and has a strong support in research (Menec, 2003). In 1961, Havighurst defined what good aging entails. Other concepts, such as "successful aging" and "healthy aging", have since emerged from the perspective of active aging. However, the concept of active aging has also been criticized for hiding structural factors such as sex/gender, class, and ethnicity through its individualistic focus (Townsend, 1986; Walker, 2002). Rozanova (2010) for example emphasizes that in contemporary societies, there is a tendency to construct the individual as responsible for remaining active. Relatedly, in the context of the Swedish news press, Ågren and Cedersund (2018) ask who

is to be considered to be responsible for making older people stay active and for reducing loneliness among older people. They argue that the way in which older people are constructed in the media has repercussions both for the way they are treated in everyday interactions and for how policies are formulated. Ågren and Cedersund (2018) conclude that the news press articles imply that the responsibility for making older people more active falls onto the older individuals themselves, even though it is the municipality's responsibility to fulfill the Social Services Act (2001:453).

Previous literature on loneliness

Reviewing literature on loneliness, we have found that loneliness most commonly is defined as pertaining to the subjective experience of being lonely. Weiss (1973) proposes that loneliness has a social and an emotional dimension. Social loneliness means a lack of social networks and friends, a sense of not being part of a social context and also not being part of society. Emotional loneliness refers to the absence of someone to turn to in confidence. Several researchers build on Weiss (1973) definition, thus defining loneliness as a lack of emotional and social relationships (cf. Dahlberg, Andersson, McKee, & Lennartsson, 2015; Fernandes, Dias Couto, & Scorsolini-Comin, 2014; Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008; Zebhauser et al., 2013). Nicolaisen and Thorsen (2014) point out that physically being alone and feeling lonely are not the same. However, a lack of social contacts can lead to loneliness. They suggest that loneliness has to be understood through three elements: Firstly, loneliness results from deficiencies in a person's social relationships. Secondly, it is a subjective experience and it is not synonymous with objective social isolation. Thirdly, the feeling of loneliness is disturbing and unpleasant. High risk groups for experiencing negative consequences of loneliness are people with low income, with physical restrictions, and with depressive symptoms (Zebhauser et al., 2013). Loneliness is also a risk factor for increased morbidity and mortality. Other researchers (Milligan, Payne, Bingley, & Cockshott, 2015) identify older men, particularly those who are divorced, or who have never married, as a risk group for experiencing loneliness. These men experience that it is hard to make new friends later in life. That men are more vulnerable to becoming lonely and experiencing loneliness seems to be true also in Sweden, as a report by Statistics Sweden (2018) showed that among the oldest men (aged 85 years and older), thirty-two percent had no close friends, while the same was true for twenty-five percent of the women.

Smith (2012) connects loneliness to a series of losses that will affect an older person. Among these are the loss of friends, loss of social status, loss of health, and loss of a spouse. These losses cause the older person to renounce past activities, which can lead to loneliness (see also Queen, Stawski, Ryan, &

Smith, 2014). Eloranta, Arve, Isoaho, Lehtonen, and Viitanen (2015) emphasize that emotional loneliness arises in situations where a reliable or intimate relationship is lacking, while social loneliness is caused by the absence of a social network. Taube, Jakobsson, Midlöv, and Kristensson (2016) suggest that older people who suffer from losses can be more afraid and anxious, and therefore more vulnerable to negative feelings of loneliness. The researchers suggest a connection between the individual's experience of loneliness and losses in life, while older people with a diminishing social network have difficulty in changing their situation. Ellwardt, Aartsen, Deeg, and Steverink (2013) suggest that loneliness is a distressing, disturbing emotional feeling, when the quality and quantity of social relations do not correspond to the person's needs. While shortage of support and a lack of social relationships are crucial markers of loneliness, it does not necessarily mean that one is experiencing loneliness. The opposite can also be true, as people who live a relatively rich social life still can experience loneliness. Hauge and Kirkevold (2010, 2012) also point out the complex nature of the concept of loneliness, as it can be both a positive and a negative experience in its nature.

In some municipalities in Sweden, senior summer camps have come up as an idea to create a place where older people can meet and break their social isolation. Traditionally, summer camps are often connected to children and childhood (Münger, 2009; Sundhall, 2016). The first attempts to arrange summer camps for older people started in late 1990s. How the senior summer camps are arranged varies. For example, some senior summer camps are organized by voluntary organizations and others by the municipality or by both together. What all have in common is that they are arranged in places close to nature so as to enable experiences in a scenic environment. The senior summer camps also often include both free time and planned activities in groups. The idea behind the arrangement is that the participants should be given the opportunity to socialize and thus break their social isolation. The goal is that the experience should lead to new habits and lasting friendships (Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson, Ekstam, & Andersson, 2018). In Sweden, a few studies about senior summer camps for older people have been conducted. The study by Nilsson et al. (2018) focused on the leaders of a senior summer camp. However, projects to decrease loneliness among older adults are often poorly evaluated (Nilsson et al., 2018). As such, this study is motivated by a need to evaluate projects to decrease older people's loneliness as well as a need for an "inside perspective", namely research that focuses on the subjective experience of loneliness by older people themselves and on the causes of experiences of loneliness. The findings presented in this article form part of a larger study evaluating a project arranging a summer camp for older people in the summer of 2017. However, in this article we focus on the situation for the participants before going on the senior summer camp. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore why the informants were

feeling lonely and considered themselves to be in need of attending a senior summer camp, and how the informants were experiencing loneliness before they went to the senior summer camp.

Method

We use a qualitative study design with a phenomenologically inspired approach, because it allows us to stay empirically close to the data while exploring why the informants are lonely and how they experience loneliness. The phenomenological approach is based on the philosophy put forward by Edmund Husserl (1913/2004) in the early 1900s. Over the years, phenomenology has been developed through the work of modern philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (C.f. Creswell, 2007). Different schools of phenomenology have developed from their works. What all share in common is that they attempt to approach the phenomenon they study by looking at it through new eyes, thus “seeing afresh”, and seeking to let the phenomenon show itself in its essence. The aim of phenomenological research is therefore to develop an understanding of the essential structures of lived experience that individuals share with one another.

Participants and data collection

In the summer of 2017, a municipality in the South of Sweden organized senior summer camps for older persons. The criteria for participating in the summer camp were that the older adult person experienced loneliness, had limited social interactions, could not themselves initiate social contacts or found it difficult to take the initiative to participate in social activities. Additional criteria were that participants had to be positive toward meeting other people, as this could lead to a widening of their social networks in the long run. They also had to be able to manage themselves without any assistance from home care. The reason for this was that the venue for the senior summer camp was not entirely accessible. Information about the senior summer camp was published on the website of the municipality, on the local radio and in the local newspaper. In addition, a brochure was published and distributed at health centers and the needs assessor’s office. Those who were interested in attending the summer camp signed up by phone or through the website of the municipality.

Out of seventy-four candidates (61 women and 13 men) who had applied for going to senior summer camp, forty (33 women and 7 men) were chosen to go after telephone interviews with the first author, a social worker with experience of qualitative interviews. The purpose of these telephone interviews was to decide if the candidate matched the criteria for going to senior summer camp. While these telephone interviews were not recorded,

extensive notes were taken in the process. Originally, these telephone interviews were not intended to be a part of a study. Upon reading the notes however we noticed that they had very rich and important information about why the informants were feeling lonely and how they experience their loneliness. Therefore, three months after the telephone interview, twenty out of the forty were asked whether they agreed to participate in the study. All but one said yes. The sample hence came to consist of nineteen older adult people (15 women and 4 men). The criteria for selecting these participants were that there should be variation with regards to their age, their sex and the way that they were experiencing their loneliness. Because very few men applied and finally participated at the senior summer camp, the share of men participating in the interviews was rather low. A more even gender balance would however have been desirable. A letter of information describing the purpose and approach of the study was sent to the persons asked to participate in the study. A form of consent was also enclosed. Background information about the informants is presented in [Table 1](#).

The study has been approved by the National Ethics Committee in Sweden (Project number 17RS4499). All participants were legally competent to give their consent. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time before the findings were published. To maintain confidentiality, we have given the informants other names. The fact that the interviewer (the first author of this article) is an experienced social worker and sociologist may have contributed to

Table 1. Information about the informants.

Name	Sex	Age	Living situation	Participates in social activities ¹
Arne	Male	74	Lives together with Freja	
Astrid	Female	84	Lives alone	X
Bodil	Female	94	Lives alone	X
Bosse	Male	82	Lives alone	
Carl	Male	90	Lives alone, wife is in a assisted living facility for people with dementia	
Clara	Female	84	Lives together with her husband	
Daga	Female	72	Lives with her husband	
Elna	Female	76	Lives alone	X
Freja	Female	76	Lives together with Arne	
Gudrun	Female	87	Lives alone	
Harriet	Female	84	Lives alone	X
Inga	Female	77	Lives alone	
Jenny	Female	83	Lives alone	
Karla	Female	80	Lives alone	X
Lena	Female	66	Lives alone	X
Maud	Female	93	Lives alone	X
Naomi	Female	87	Lives alone	X
Olga	Female	74	Lives alone	
Torsten	Male	86	Lives alone	X

¹The social activities mentioned by the informants are: being an active member of a pensioners' organization, work out at a gym or do gymnastics, do volunteer work, participate in activities organized by the municipality or the church, and sing in a choir.

the participants feeling a sense of confidence due to her competence. However, it cannot be ruled out that the interviewer's background influenced the participants to say what they felt the interviewer wanted to hear. An effort was made to avoid socially desirable answers by the way the questions were framed and by asking follow-up questions. Perhaps it also needs to be pointed out that in most qualitative studies, as in this one, the intention is not to generalize the information, but to elucidate the particular and the specific, such as the experience of loneliness. Hence, this study makes no claims to generalization.

Analysis

We turned to Giorgi's (2009) four steps when conducting the analysis. The first step is to read all the empirical material in its entirety. All three authors conducted separate analyses in the first step by reading the notes from the telephone interviews. We marked when the informants talked about the experience of loneliness and when they talked about why they were lonely, using different colors. The second step is to split each interview into meaningful units by marking where in the text a shift in meaning occurs. The third step is then to take these meaningful units and express them in a language that is more closely related to the research topic. We did this by transforming the meaningful units into gerontological social work sensitive statements, hence connecting what the informant said to its relation to social work. In the fourth and last step, Giorgi (2009) proposes that the researcher should seek patterns in the material, such as common themes. During this last step, we started to see different patterns emerging from the informants' stories and we started to make categories out of these patterns. They were revised a few times before the categorizations of the informants' answers became clearer. These categories were then formulated into the themes that are presented in the section "Findings".

Findings

The findings are presented here in line with the two research questions as two sections, starting with (1) why the informants were feeling lonely and considered themselves to be in need of attending a senior summer camp, and followed by (2) how the informants were experiencing loneliness before they went to the senior summer camp.

Why the informants were feeling lonely and considered themselves to be in need of attending a senior summer camp

In this section we will present the two themes "Hard to make new friends" and "Other circumstances making it hard to be social" that appeared in the

informants' experiences. In order to illuminate the findings, the themes are exemplified with quotations from the interviews.

Hard to make new friends

Many of the informants said that it was hard to make contact with others. It was hard to make new friends and even in those cases where the informants were rather active in different social contexts, they failed to make friends that would give them a deep and meaningful relationship. While the social context of their activities seems to be important, having acquaintances in different social contexts was no substitute for having a close friend or someone to share everyday life with or someone to talk to in confidence. Some of the informants mentioned being relocated as a reason for loneliness. As Daga says, "It was unfortunate that we moved to [name of the city] in 1998". Hence, even if it has been many years since Daga relocated to her new neighborhood, she says that she has not been able to make any new friends in the area.

Other circumstances making it hard to be social

A more practical reason for loneliness was the absence of a car. For these informants it was not so easy to travel with public transport instead, and they had been more flexible when they owned a car. Two of the informants mention their financial situation as a reason for loneliness. Elna for example experiences herself to be lonely and the reason for this is that she feels isolated because she has no car and because of her financial situation. Sometimes she takes the bus or the train and also rides her bike for shorter distances. She is active in a retirement organization and plays golf sometimes. The retirement organization arranges trips, but they cost money, which is a problem for her.

How the informants were experiencing loneliness before they went to the senior summer camp

In this section we will present the following six themes that emerged from the interviews: "Feel very lonely even if they lead rich social lives", "Loss of loved ones", "Do not want to do things alone", "Friends make a difference", "Do not feel lonely but need a change" and "Loneliness occurs at certain times".

Feel very lonely even if they lead rich social lives

Many of the informants participate in social activities, yet they still express feelings of loneliness. For example, Bodil says that she feels very lonely. She is active in a choir that performs at retirement homes. She is also an active member of a retirement organization. She has also been volunteering in a secondhand store. Hence, Bodil is a very active person with many engagements, but still she expresses that she feels very lonely. Bodil says: "I would

like to have someone to talk to, in that way I am lonely” and then she continues to say that: “So many thoughts come up when you are lonely”.

Another example of experiencing loneliness despite leading rich social lives can be found in Torsten who also says that he feels very lonely. Torsten says that: “Sometimes I buy good food and cook it, but when I sit down to eat it I feel so lonely that I just cry”. This is despite the fact that he lives in a good retirement community where he has a social connection with the other residents. However, he feels that it is hard to make contact with others. Apart from his daughter, he has no other living relatives nearby.

Loss of loved ones

Many of the informants had experienced the loss of loved ones like their partner, friends and children. These losses made them miss someone to share their life with. One example can be found in Gudrun who has experienced devastating losses. Both of her children have died within two years. She has been in deep sorrow but decided to take control over her situation and to start living again. Gudrun says: “you never get used to loneliness”. Another example is Harriet, who feels very lonely after the loss of her husband: “Since my husband died I have no one to talk to, we were married for 58 years”. Before her husband died, Harriet also found it difficult to be social because her husband was so sick it was hard for Harriet to leave home. Now she participates in a knitting café and sometimes enjoys entertainment for senior citizens arranged by the municipality. She is also a member in a pensioner organization that has regular meetings once a month. However, lately she has not been able to go to these meetings. Even though she has been trying to be social, she still feels lonely after the death of her husband.

The loss of a loved one was not always connected with the loved one dying. Rather, it could also be a feeling of loss when a partner moved to an assistant living facility. For example, Carl has taken care of his wife, who recently moved to an assistant living facility for people with dementia. Carl shifts from being very lonely, to say that he feels lonely sometimes and that he does *not* feel lonely. Carl describes himself as a “lonely wolf” and hesitated to go on summer camp because he is not sure he would enjoy spending time with “only old people”. Carl says that he does not mind being alone: “I do not have so much need to have friends and acquaintances. I enjoy being alone. But it became lonely when my wife moved into the nursing home. Before, there was someone else, another human that was always nearby. I miss having anyone nearby”. Carl also mentions that he used to play a lot of golf, but those he played with are now dead.

Do not want to do things alone

Some of the informants talked about how hard it was to do things alone and that it was hard to enter new social contexts alone. What they wished for was some company to do things with, as in the story of Maud. Maud recently

relocated to get closer to her daughter. However, her daughter is very busy with her own family, so they do not spend as much time together as Maud hoped for. Since Maud's husband died some years ago, she finds that time goes slowly and she would like to have some more company. Maud says that "I have a great need to meet other people". She attends a reading circle and a retirement organization's meetings. She also visits the soup lunches that are arranged by the church. Even so, she feels that it is hard to make contact with others and she does not want to intrude on anyone: "Sometimes you feel that you should not be so pushy".

Another example comes from the story of Naomi who says that when her husband was alive, they were often out dancing: "Me and my husband were out dancing a lot, often twice a week but now it's not that fun to go by myself". She describes herself as active, but feels that life is boring, and therefore she would like to go out and meet others. She has some friends that she meets regularly. For both Maud and Naomi, not having anyone to go out and do things with is an obstacle, and therefore they do not socialize as much as they would like to.

Lena however also misses having someone to do things with but even so she still goes to the theater or other activities by herself: "I have no friends but I go to theaters and other places myself". As a person, Lena is very social and participates in game nights and social cafés arranged by her neighborhood association. She likes to travel, but as a senior citizen, she cannot afford to go on any trips. Before retiring, Lena had a lot of friends, but she experienced that they disappeared after she retired.

Friends make a difference

Some of the informants say that they do not experience feeling lonely all the time but sometimes. What many of them have in common is that they have someone in their life who is important, they have friends. Take the example of Karla. Because of pain in her feet, Karla has difficulty in walking. Her reason for applying to senior summer camp was to get the chance to get away and see something else for a change. During the interview, Karla says: "I do not suffer from loneliness, but it is boring. I feel young in my mind". However, she has three girlfriends with whom she socializes, and therefore she does not feel lonely all the time. With her friends, she sings in a vocal group and frequently exercises at the gym.

The loss of friends, as in the case of Olga, can be a difficult situation. For 15 years, she lived near her son and took care of her grandchild. Because Olga has helped her children so much, she has not stayed in touch with her old friends. Now she mostly has contact with one of her old friends and they try to meet once a week: "I have one friend and we try to go out walking together once a week". Even though Olga expresses that she is very lonely she also says that she does not think of herself as so lonely but rather as suffering from boredom.

One reason for appearing ambivalent in her feelings of loneliness is that she has an old friend in her life with whom she can talk and shares a history with, hence just having one close friend seems to make a difference.

One might perhaps think that living together with someone, a partner as in the case of Arne and Freja, would hinder them from feeling lonely. However, in the interview they both say: “We are lonely, even if we are in good health”. They thus experience a sadness in being in pretty good health but not having the social life they want with friends. A reason for them missing friends is because they have been taking care of a disabled son for many years. The caregiving responsibility has been time-consuming and therefore Arne and Freja have not been able to socialize with friends as much as they would have liked. They have recently relocated so they have not yet made any friends in their new neighborhood. The combination of having a caregiving responsibility that has consumed a lot of time and the recent relocation make them feel that they have lost contact with old friends and have not yet been able to make new friends.

This is also evident in Inga’s story. When she became a widow some years ago, she moved to another city to provide care for her parent. To get to know people in her new town, she started to play golf but could not continue playing because the caregiving responsibility for her parents consumed most of her time. Inga says: “Sometimes I feel lonely. Then I don’t know what to do. I can go out and try to find things to do. It’s hard to be alone”. Even if Inga has a good relationship with her daughter and her son-in-law, she still misses “real” friends. This is also something that most of the informants shared in common: that they had close family members who come to visit, so they were not entirely alone. However, it seems as though friends and family members contribute to different needs. Even if one has close family, friends are still important to not feel lonely.

For many of the informants, going the senior summer camp was a chance to meet new friends. Astrid for example says that she does not feel lonely because she has an active life playing boules and miniature golf. She has a close friend that also is a widow and they have known each other a long time. In the interview, Astrid says: “I am a very social person so when I saw the ad [for the senior summer camp] I thought that you could meet other friends there”. Hence her reason for applying for senior summer camp was that she is a very social person and she saw it as a way to make new friends. Even though it might look like Astrid has a good social situation and she says that she is not lonely, she still seems to miss having more friends to socialize with. Even if having one close friend seems to be important, there is also a risk of becoming lonely if the friend dies or becomes very ill.

Do not feel lonely but need a change

Some of the informants applied for the senior summer camp but did not consider themselves to be lonely. Jenny for example did not apply to go to summer camp due to feelings of loneliness. Although she likes being on her

own, she would like to get away and make new experiences: “I never go anywhere, but it could be fun to come out”. Hence, the feeling of loneliness is not just not having others to socialize with, but rather it seems as though it also has something to do with the need of doing something else or having a change in everyday life. This is something that nearly all of the informants talk about.

Another example of the theme of feeling the need of a change also appears in Bosse’s story. He has had a long history of illness. His wife has been taking care of him, and it was to ease the burden on his wife that Bosse applied to go to senior summer camp. However, Bosse also expresses that he wants some relaxation for his own: “It’s nice relaxation there [meaning where the summer camp is held], I’ve been there before in my work”. Hence it is not only to ease the burden from his wife, but rather that he also himself is longing for a retreat.

The situation for Clara is reversed. For the past seven years, she has been providing care for her husband who is suffering from dementia. Clara says: “I can’t go anywhere because my husband has dementia and has had it for 7 years. He is dependent on me”. At first Clara insisted on her husband to come along to the senior summer camp. However, the municipality arranged a short-term residence for her husband so Clara could go to summer camp without having to provide care for him. Before her husband’s dementia, they were very active in an outdoor association and used to go sailing frequently. These interests remain, but her husband’s dementia and the fact that Clara has lost a lot of her sight make it difficult to be as active as they once were. Even if Clara does not feel lonely, she is in need of a change from everyday life and the caring responsibility that she has for her husband.

Loneliness occurs at certain times

It was rather striking to see that many of the informants connected loneliness to certain times. Summertime along with weekends and evenings were considered to be the loneliest times. Apart from the informants who said that time in general goes slowly or that life is boring, there was also one informant, Torsten, who pointed out dinnertime as associated with a strong feeling of loneliness.

Discussion

Through this analysis inspired by phenomenology we have come to better understand loneliness as a multifaceted phenomenon that is associated with both personal circumstances and social situations. These insights have importance for gerontological social work and will be further discussed in this section.

Findings connected to why the informants were feeling lonely suggest that informants found it was hard to make new friends. This reminds one of Weiss (1973) definition of emotional loneliness as the lack of someone to turn to in confidence. The loss of friends or loved ones, be it because they

have passed away or because they have lost touch, is also mentioned by many of the informants. This loss in combination with the difficulty of making new friends is a dilemma for older people. Being relocated was also mentioned by some informants as a reason for loneliness. Hence for social workers, this perhaps also points out older people who have relocated as a group that is more vulnerable to loneliness. Thus, being older, the possibility of meeting new friends in a new neighborhood becomes limited when there are no or only a few common activities to participate in. This suggests the importance of creating social events where older people might have a chance to meet new friends. Considering how important deeper relationships with friends might be for not feeling lonely, and how loneliness can have a negative impact on health, there should perhaps be more efforts from society (civil as well as in the municipalities, and former workplaces) to arrange more forums for senior citizens to meet others.

Another situation that deserves to be considered as a risk for loneliness is being a caregiver. According to the Swedish Social Services Act (2001:453), the municipalities “shall” provide support to family caregivers. Hence, an important form of support from the findings in this study might be that social workers need to address caregivers’ feelings of loneliness and to offer support during an ongoing caregiving responsibility, as well as afterward.

The informants also mentioned other circumstances making it hard to be social, such as not having a car and their financial situation as reasons for loneliness. Not having a car can be seen as an expression for not being as flexible as one would wish to be and that it becomes too hard to go by public transport when becoming impaired in function. Additionally, older people with low pensions might also be more vulnerable to becoming lonely which is an important practical implication for social workers. According to previous research (cf. Zebhauser et al., 2013), people with low income are a high risk group for experiencing negative consequences of loneliness. Thus, not being able to make changes in everyday life and the experience of boredom might be connected to the feeling of loneliness, especially when you do not know what to do or lack the means to do something different.

It is rather surprising that only one informant mentions that they think there is a lack of social activities arranged for seniors. What this might suggest is that loneliness is seen as a personal responsibility. To place demands on more activities being arranged for senior citizens is also to say that my loneliness does not entirely depend on myself. Such demands may also perhaps build on the knowledge that it is the municipality’s responsibility to ensure that “older adults should have an active and meaningful life in community with others”, as stipulated in the Social Services Act (2001:453).

Concerning the experience of loneliness, our findings show that informants expressed feelings of loneliness even if they lead rich social lives. This can be understood from Eloranta et al. (2015), who suggest that emotional loneliness

can arise even though the individual is active and has a social network. This is also found in other studies; Ellwardt et al. (2013) for instance emphasize that even when living a relatively rich social life, people can still experience loneliness. This has important implications for social workers. Older people who are considered to be living active lives can still suffer from feelings of loneliness, so it is always important to ask how they are feeling.

Loss of loved ones was also a reason why the informants experience loneliness. Not only was the loss of friends and loved ones in itself hard, but it could also mean that one could no longer carry out certain activities one used to partake in. For example, it is difficult to continue playing golf when all one's golf buddies have died. As Smith (2012) puts forward, becoming old is connected to a series of losses. Thus, as such it is an important implication for social workers who meet with older people who have lost their friends or family members to encourage them to continue participating in activities or to help them find new ones. In a study by Taube et al., (2016) it is also described how older people who lose loved ones find difficulties in creating new contacts in connection with the loss. These phenomena contribute to experiencing more loneliness and isolation. Hence, the informants' experiences of not having the possibility to choose to be lonely because they always are alone is also a result found in other studies (cf. Queen et al., 2014; Smith, 2012), making the feeling of loneliness more present. Furthermore, Milligan et al. (2015) found in their study that men also have a harder time making new friends late in life. Older men may therefore be particularly vulnerable to loneliness. The fact that only a few men applied for going on the senior summer camp might suggest that it is much harder for men to admit to or to seek help for their loneliness. The challenge for social workers is thus to attract men to interventions intended to decrease older people's loneliness.

Some informants expressed the consequences of loneliness in a more specific way, namely that they did not want to do things alone. Several researchers suggest that being active is an important part of the healthy aging process (Menec, 2003). However, it seems that activity itself is not sufficient to reduce the feeling of loneliness. An essential aspect that the findings highlight here is the importance of having someone to share activities and thus the experiences with. In that respect, findings show that friends (or just one close friend) make a difference. Thus, in cases where loved ones pass away, old friends could be important because of having a shared history. Furthermore, one might think that family members are of greater importance than friends when it comes to not feeling lonely. However, our findings indicate that friends and family members perhaps contribute to different needs. Even if one has close family, friends are still important to not feel lonely.

Findings in this study also show that it was not always the immediate feeling of loneliness that made participants apply for senior summer camps.

Most of the informants talk about the need to belong to something or the need of a change in everyday life. Ellwardt et al. (2013) emphasize that in interaction with other people, the individual is challenged to new experiences. This might suggest that boredom and the absence of experiencing something new are connected to feelings of loneliness. Hence, having the opportunity to go somewhere else and meet with people you have not met before gives a new experience that might ease the feeling of boredom and thereby also loneliness. This may be not least because it is so clearly revealed in the interviewees' stories that loneliness becomes most apparent at very specific times, such as summertime, weekends, and evenings. One informant also mentioned dinnertime as the loneliest time. Since people often consider dining as a social event, this is perhaps not surprising.

Hence, we think that this finding has major implications for social workers to the effect that social events to break older people's loneliness need to be arranged around these very specific times. These are also times when people in general do fun and exciting things and this is probably what the informants themselves used to do.

Having looked into both the informants' experiences of loneliness and the causes of their feelings of loneliness, we would like to take a moment to discuss what it means that many of the informants feel very lonely even if they lead rich social lives. They participate in different activities but they still feel lonely. Our interpretation is that social activities are important, but what the informants are missing is a meaningful relationship with someone who they can turn to in confidence and share experiences with.

Arranging social activities where such relationships might flourish is perhaps a challenge for social workers. However, that many of the informants were active but still very lonely might also have to do with the dominant norms of being and staying active (cf. Havighurst, 1961; Menec, 2003). Older adult people themselves might feel pressured to stay active and to participate in different social events, but being active does not satisfy the need of a close relationship. Another consequence may be that older people have a picture or an ideal image of what successful and active aging looks like, perhaps full of activities and doing things with friends. They may however feel insufficient to fulfill that ideal of a successful and active old age. We find it important at this point to raise the question of what dominant norms of "active" and "successful" aging might do to older individuals' images of how old age should be, and to their self-esteem when they fail to uphold that ideal in the long run.

Based on the findings of this study, it is perhaps not enough to be active, as it is not a vaccine against loneliness and depression. Perhaps what is needed is a balance between offering older people activities that help them keep up their old interests and to continue to develop these interests, or to help them find new ones. But we also need to offer them a chance to talk about their lives, their feelings, their loss of abilities, loss of friends and loved ones, and about

their image of life in old age. To have a social worker or a counselor to talk to is rarely offered to older adults in Sweden. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2012, 2013a, 2013b) has repeatedly stated that health care and social care services have poorer resources to handle depression and mental illness when it comes to older people. Older people do not have access to specialized psychiatric care to the same extent as younger people. Older people receive more medication and are rarely supported in the form of counseling therapy, although it is recommended for depression (SBU, 2015; The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2013b).

Not that we are suggesting that activities are not important, because they are, but the findings of this study have important implications for the kinds of activities that are needed and at what times they need to be provided (such as summertime, weekends, and evenings). Just focusing on activities might prevent us from seeing that other important efforts such as counseling also might be needed. As such, the norms of aging cannot all be about staying active, even if it is important, but there is a need for a more balanced picture which more people can identify with. Not that we are saying that people should not have high expectations of their later life, many older people do live active lives with friends and family, but those who fail to reach this ideal image should not be depressed and feel alone because they do not live up to the ideal. Many of us will in fact also lose friends and loved ones. Many of us will eventually suffer from disabilities that will make it harder to remain active. It is here social services have a huge challenge to offer activities to those who want to participate in them. These activities, according to the findings from this study, need to be designed so that the participants will have a chance to make new friends and create meaningful relationships. However, our analysis also suggests that while social services need to address the question of activities for older people, they also need to address the question of offering someone to talk to about life and about becoming old to those that want it.

The Social Services Act (2001:453) in Sweden does not specify assessments for older adults. Rather, needs assessors are to decide on types of assessments based on the needs of the individual and take these needs as the basis for choosing an appropriate measure. Thus, it is possible for older adults to apply for “accompaniment” or “social togetherness” as a form of assessment. However, it is not uncommon for needs assessors to have many cases and limited time. As Olaison (2009) points out, needs assessors are often forced to choose strategies for dealing with cases in a time-efficient manner, which can lead to simplified categorizations of people’s needs. The risk is therefore that the needs assessors address older adults’ requests for assessments according to a “service catalog” (Olaison, 2009). The fact that the municipalities have guidelines for how different needs are to be met according to such a “service catalog” can also lead to the needs assessors experiencing a limited scope for action which prevents the possibility of flexible and individualized

solutions. So even though the assessments of accompaniment or social togetherness exist and despite the fact that there is no limit in the law to how often and how many hours this can be granted, it is frequently granted for one or two hours a week. The intention is to make sure that the older adult comes outside for a walk or is accompanied to the hairdresser, to the dentist or to a doctor's appointment. Furthermore, there is a clause in the Swedish Social Services Act (2001:453) that says that only those who cannot meet their needs in other ways will receive social services. This means that if there are voluntary organizations such as the Red Cross that can provide accompaniment for example, this need can be considered to be met. From the interviews, we cannot tell if the informants have an assessment such as accompaniment or social togetherness. We can however see that there is an unmet need for some of the informants who wish to have someone accompany them to different events. However, to have someone from the municipality or from a voluntary organization is perhaps not really what they are asking for, as they perhaps are asking for friendship. But then again, perhaps if such accompaniment was available to go out dancing, continue playing golf, or to watch a movie or go to the theater and so on, it might be a help for those who do not want to do things alone.

Study limitations

This study has some limitations. One limitation is that the study only includes four men. This is unfortunate, as Milligan et al. (2015) suggest that older men might be particularly vulnerable of becoming lonely. In this study we cannot see that the experience of being lonely would differ between the male and the female informants. Yet, in our study there clearly is a gender bias because older adult men's loneliness is underrepresented. Another limitation is that these telephone interviews were not recorded, however, as already mentioned, extensive notes were taken.

Conclusion

The findings show that the informants were feeling lonely for several reasons. They found it difficult to make new contacts with others, some friends had passed away, they had lost touch with other friends, several informants had been or still were caregivers, some had relocated recently, and not having access to a car or being in a poor financial situation were all reasons for feeling lonely. Many of the informants experienced being very lonely, even if they lead rich social lives. The experience of loneliness was also connected to a lack of meaningful relationships with someone they can turn to in confidence and share experiences with. They felt the need to belong to something or the need of a change in everyday life.

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