

7th ESA Conference
September 9 – 12, 2005 Torun, Poland
Session 6: Families, Networks and Intergenerational Relations

Experiences of loneliness

Hanna Palkeinen

Tampere School of Public Health, University of Tampere, Finland

The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged, Finland

e-mail: hanna.palkeinen@uta.fi

Introduction

In this paper, I will concern loneliness in text written by old people. The purpose is not to give an exact definition for loneliness, but to analyse what kind of associations and thoughts elderly people associates with loneliness.

There are many different definitions of loneliness in earlier studies. It is impossible to find one universal definition for loneliness, because it is a subjective experience and varies between cultures and individuals. (Rokach et al. 2001, Perlman 2004.) Several studies have focused on loneliness among the elderly. The majority of these are descriptive and cross-sectional. Interest has focused, for example, on the frequency of loneliness in different marital statuses, living arrangements, gender and increasing age. (Jylhä 2004, Tijhuis et al. 1999). There are studies about the predictors and causes of loneliness, such as limited social network (Bondevik & Skogstad 1998, Savikko et al. 2005), poor health and low functioning (Andersson 1998, Perlman & Russel 2004, Tiikkainen et al. 2004), low level of education and poor income (Savikko et al. 2005). Yet the qualitative aspects and subjective experiences of loneliness among elderly people have received little attention.

Data

The data of this paper comprise texts from therapeutic writing groups organised by the Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged in Finland. The groups were a part of the larger research project on the alleviation loneliness among old people. (Pitkälä et al. 2003.) The members of the groups were 76 to 88 years old and lived at home. There were 15 women and 5 men. Most of them were widowed and they had a relatively high level of education. They reported in a mailed survey that they suffered from loneliness and that they wanted to participate in the group. (Marjovuoto et al. 2005.) There were three writing groups. The groups convened once a week for three months. One meeting lasted one and half hours.

The groups had a psychotherapeutic orientation. The purpose in the groups was to organise the life situation by writing and talking. (Pitkälä & Mäntyranta 2005.) A important working tool was the therapeutic writing. In the literature therapeutic writing is defined as reflective writing, which helps people organise their own thoughts and psychological affairs (Esterling et al. 1999, Wright & Chung 2001, Groom & Pennebaker 2004). Some group members write regularly as a hobby and others not at all. Thus there is considerable variation in the length and writing styles of the texts. The members wrote between the meetings and returned the texts to the group leaders.

The members were given instructions about writing. The purpose of the instructions was to encourage members to write freely, but at the same time the instructions included detailed questions. There were three questions about loneliness: When are you the loneliest, what does loneliness mean to you and to what do you attribute your loneliness? The majority of the questions (28/33) concerned the members' own hopes, experiences and thoughts about the group. There was a question about the writer's own life situation and a question about their thoughts of their own future. (Marjovuoto et al. 2005.)

The data comprise 90 texts (118 pages). With one exception they all had to do with loneliness. Because of the writing instructions and the group meetings, the majority of the texts concern things which are connected with the group. The members wrote about the tension and hopes when the group started, and the benefits and feelings when the group ended. They wrote about

conversations and thoughts aroused in the group. The texts contained descriptions of the writer's own life situation, memories and important things in everyday life like meeting friends and relatives, meaningful activities and enjoying nature. They wrote about negative things, too, like visits to hospitals and their own or friends' illnesses. Some of texts were religious.

Analysis

The texts were quite difficult to approach from the perspective of loneliness. The participants wrote on loneliness in connection with various matters and other negative things. The texts are very associative and the writers do not include a logical consideration of loneliness in the texts. The writing instructions, group meetings and research schedule all created the context for the texts. The writer's own aims were a context, too, and that effected what they wrote. Because of that it is reasonable to study the text in the contexts and culture.

I started to read the texts without any exact definition of loneliness. The open research question was what the participants wrote, when the one given theme was loneliness. The aim was not to study loneliness as a previously defined phenomenon, but on the contrary to look at loneliness from the cultural and everyday thinking point of view. I did not analyse only those parts of texts explicitly concerning loneliness. Rather I looked at the texts through the contexts of loneliness given by the writing introductions.

I read the texts as dialogues, even if the texts were composed when their writers were alone. The texts were written for the readers, hence the dialogical nature of the interaction between writers and readers. The writing could mean conversation with other people on the part of the writers even if the interlocutor was not physically present at the time of writing. (Vološinov 1990.) I understand language as a social activity as in the social constructionist perspective. When people use language they construct different interpretations from events and phenomena. Cultural images do not determine people's thinking, but offer concepts and images with which to write about loneliness. The context affects how people construct images in language. (Burr 1995, Potter 1996, Wetherell 2002.)

I analysed the data using the discursive approach (Taylor 2001). I paid attention to the meanings of loneliness and how the meanings were constructed in language. (Jokinen & Juhila 1999, 66). Even if I searched for different meanings and explanations of loneliness, I considered what points of view elderly people raised about loneliness. My interest was the things which writers reflected in loneliness and what kind of images they construct of it. I started to outline the texts by paying attention to the parts where writers talked of loneliness in some way. I read those parts asking how and what emerges when an elderly person wrote about loneliness. I identified four different points of view. All those viewpoints were characterized by some keyword: the lack of meaningful activity, sense of insecurity and feelings of longing and being an outsider. The writers used different kinds of literary styles and they had different ambitions in their writing. Because of this, it is reasonable to read the texts by looking at the variety of language use. Under the keywords, I analyse texts closer by focusing attention on the metaphors, the variety of literary styles and explanations for loneliness. All potentially identifying information was changed in this paper.

The four points of view on loneliness

Lack of meaningful activity

In the texts, many writers describe a lack of activity and that they have nothing to do. Diminished functional ability and poor health seems to be a reason why the writers cannot do what they have been used to. In the next extract a writer describes the difficulties of walking and hearing as obstacles to meaningful activity.

Loneliness is CHAOS. Now when the dark time is beginning. There are no birds anymore = swans; the boats does not come and go; the trees will die in a standing position; it will be colder and slippery, when walking is harder. Even in summertime, I feel loneliness. I am not able to go even to the free admittance events in the city. [...] Now my hearing capacity is worse and that is why I cannot go to the theatre – even if I have a good place. (Female, widow)

This writer uses many strong metaphors to describe her loneliness. She brings up many things, explanations and trains of thoughts, and loneliness seems not to be an unambiguous phenomenon. Maybe she wants with her literary style and changing styles to express the chaos and show how difficult it is to capture the essence of loneliness. She may refer to chaos as some kind of uncontrolled and confused situation, which in the text seems to be stagnation and even poverty. She uses strong style contrasts, strong expressions of feelings and powerful metaphors. All these overlap with ordinary, realistic and pragmatic description. She gives an explanation for her situation: she cannot cope. This may be interpreted as both physical weakness and partly losing interest in activity. In many texts, writers describe how the winter seasons create obstacles to walking outside and that causes loneliness. In this text, the writer mentions the emptiness in nature. Outside there is nothing the writer can watch from the window. The connection to the outside is tenuous or it is broken. In this text the activity and doing something seem to be doing alone. Activity does not include a concrete social network as in the next extract.

Loneliness means mainly spiritual and physical depression, when a person is incapable of any initiative. Maybe loneliness is felt most in long winter months, when there is little to do, and it is dark and gloomy outside. The feeling of loneliness is caused partly by losing friends and a lack of something to do, too. (Male, married)

In this text, the writer gives reasons why people may be lonely. The individual may feel that she or he has lost meaningful social contacts and the feeling of being an active participant in society. This writer underlines an inability to start to do something, or doing something is not meaningful to the person. He gives tentative definitions and meanings to loneliness. The phenomenon seems to have many different meanings and it is difficult to try to define it. The writer answers directly to the questions of the writing instructions. He writes about loneliness as a general phenomenon without his own subjective experiences of loneliness.

A sense of insecurity

The writers talk about loneliness as a sense of insecurity, the increasing need for help and illness. The future is frightening because of the feeling that there is nobody who can help you. Many

writers mention insecurity as a common phenomenon, but they do not associate their own individual experiences with their descriptions like the writers in the following extracts.

Particularly after that I started to live alone about ten years ago, life has been mounting tension for me. I have a feeling that there is nobody to turn to, if suddenly my feet go from under me as has happened a couple of times. (Female, never married)

I feel most the pain of loneliness when my intelligent and scintillating friend of many years' standing is absolutely "uncomprehending". It depresses my mind and invokes the horror: that is what I shall be like. It leaves sorrow for a friend and then I feel acutely the pain of loneliness, [...] Instinctively I will observe my own actions: "is it that?" (Female, never married)

In the first extract the writer describes living alone and insecurity about getting help. She uses poetic style, lively description and her choice of words demonstrates the subjectivity of loneliness. The second writer says that illness, especially dementia makes the future frightening for her. She gives an explanation for her own loneliness: her friend has changed. She constructs the dramatic change by contrast. The intelligent friend is now absolutely uncomprehending. The writer describes the sorrow and how she misses her old friend. At the same time, she expresses her concern about her own future and losing her own identity and personality as happened to her friend. The sense of insecurity is explained by inability to exert influence on her or his future and to be an independent individual.

The feeling of being an outsider

The theme of loneliness emerges when the writers describe the dwindling of human relationships, particularly losing significant relationships. In the next extract, the writer remembers how many friends and contacts she had in the past. Now the situation is different and the contrast between past and present time is great.

Loneliness to me is as if life is coming to a stop. Earlier I would not have believed that I would experience kind of situation. [...] In the past I was always connected to many people because of my hobbies and work. I am troubled by loneliness in the dark seasons, holidays like Christmas. [...] Especially in recent years the group of my friends has become almost non-existent because of death. (Female, widow)

In this text, the writer describes how her social network has dwindled. This is the reason for her feeling of having stagnated. The metaphor may describe the feeling of being an outsider and losing the feeling of activity in this society. This kind of situation is a surprise for her. She writes that she would not have believed she would encounter this kind of situation. In western culture people often think of public holidays as a time when friends and relatives are together. However, holidays are a time of loneliness for people who live alone and have a small social network. In this extract, the friends appear to be same age as the writer. In old age, number of people's peers will decrease because of death. Many writers report that this is in the nature of things.

The next extract is part of longer text where the writer analyses loneliness. She writes about three different kinds of loneliness: being alone as something concrete, the feeling of alienation in the group and the deep feeling of loneliness.

The deep feeling of loneliness. It is like a disease. It rips apart, it spoils the joy of life. Its hallmarks are hopelessness, powerlessness, listlessness, "self-rejection". Everything is over, and still breath wheezes, though it is not that what you would want. I came to the roots of suicide! (Female, widow)

The writer underlines the depth of loneliness by her style of writing and using concepts of this kind. Other writers rarely invoke such a deep loneliness. In this text, the writer describes loneliness as a common phenomenon and she does not claim that her own loneliness is like that. The style of writing changed when she mentioned suicide. She starts to talk to herself. It looks as if she wants to show that she writes about suicide with irony and in a reflective way. That is why the reader does not need to take the writer's suicidal ideation seriously. The writer mentions the themes self-rejection and depression. Also the other writers talk about depression. It seems that there is a similarity between loneliness and depression. The descriptions of a lack of ambition,

inefficiency and inability to cope are quite close to the descriptions of diminishing energy, losing the feelings of enjoyment and interest, which are among the criteria of depression in the psychiatric literature.

The feeling of longing

The writers talk about loneliness as a feeling of longing. The longing is directed in two directions: to the past that they once had and what should have been happened. The writers explain the feelings of loneliness by longing and missing the lost important relationships.

The end of January. January, januarius, Janus-faced, looking in two direction. Loneliness has Janus-faces. [...] Now it is again time to be alone. Janus has uncovered both his faces. "Where are all those, who were before us?" Most of them have moved to the secret humankind of hopes and faiths. The friend of decades lives in a world of hallucination – I wish to know what are her joys and sorrows. The longing is so strong, that it hurts, bites, causes anxiety. (Female, never married)

In this text, the writer describes the feelings of longing associated with missing an important relationship. She expresses strong longing and connects it with physical feelings. Again the text is written in a poetic and sentimental style and there are many metaphors. The writer calls loneliness Janus- faced. She describes loneliness as two-faced: negative loneliness and positive aloneness. The Finnish language lacks different words for the positive and negative aspects of loneliness. On the other hand, the metaphor may be constructed of change and transitions such as the progression from past to future, from one condition to another. In old age people are more alone and lose the spouse, friends and relatives, and the unfamiliar future with the growing need for help may cause a longing for times past. In the next extract the writer tells about the dreams which will never come true.

The dreams of a shared old age are dead. The death was caused by Alzheimer. It has been difficult to watch my husband with whom I have lived for 50 years changing more and

more into another person. I still can't accept that. The ensuing loneliness seems insuperably. (Female, married)

The writer tells about her hopes of marriage in old age and at the same time gives explanations why she is lonely. She writes that her dreams are dead because of her husband's sickness. Because she uses this kind of strong concept, the situation seems to be absolute and final. She writes about loneliness as if she cannot overcome or alleviate it. Other writers write that in old age people do not have plans for the future. This may be one cause of loneliness: people have nothing to look forward to.

Discussion

The texts of writing groups are challenging as research data. The writers mentioned many things in their texts which were influenced by their individual ambitions, different backgrounds and relatively high level of education. Besides that, they construed the group meetings and writing introductions many ways. For part of the participants writing was a familiar and customary way to express their own feelings and for others writing was unfamiliar. The writers may have used the writing tool for different purposes. Some of the writers expressed their feelings and clarified their thoughts, but some might wanted to show their literary talents, too. The theme of loneliness was not always primary thing in all the writers' minds; and on the other hand it was the allotted subject for the texts. The writing situation may have invited the writers to take different things as loneliness, because that theme was given to them.

It seems that the writers have not considered loneliness before. The writing tasks and group meetings requested them to look at loneliness in a new way. The writers' texts are very associative and there are few logical considerations about loneliness. The texts were written in many different styles because of the ambitions and on the other hand unfamiliarity of writing. There is a lot of stylistic variety between the texts. The writers changed styles between their own texts and even in the same text. There are marked contrasts between different writing styles in the texts. The strong metaphors and powerful emotional expression are limited to common, realistic description. A conflict can be discerned in the texts between lofty and pragmatic style.

Every writer had many meanings for loneliness. In different situations and different relations loneliness may appear differently. This finding challenged the view of loneliness in quantitative studies as stable and unambiguous loneliness. (Rubenstein & Shaver 1982, Rokach & Brock 1997.) In the texts, the different meanings of loneliness could be viewed at the same time. The writing provided a way to discuss things writers have on their minds. They expressed negative feelings in many ways and connected different things to loneliness, probably because that the theme was given to them. All those things and feelings may not have been connected with loneliness in different contexts. In previous studies, people have talked about loneliness as being abandoned (Sader & Johnson 1980, McInnis & White 2001), feelings of rejection (Rokach & Brock 1997), detached feelings (Killeen 1998) and feelings of loss of respect (van der Geest 2004). These themes emerged from the present texts.

In the texts, the writers talk about loneliness as both a common phenomenon and as a subjective experience. Even if they described loneliness as quite a natural phenomenon of old age, they covered their own subjective feelings of loneliness behind associative style and metaphors. The writers considered loneliness a common phenomenon by putting faith in assumptions which are accepted and widespread in our culture. This may suggest that it is hard to verbalize the feeling of loneliness (McInnis & White 2001). The metaphors and poetic language may also hide subjective descriptions of loneliness.

Several studies have considered the connection between loneliness and depression (Adams et al. 2004, Heikkinen & Kauppinen 2004, Stek et al. 2005). The connection also appears in the present data. It is hard and usually not meaningful to try to distinguish between loneliness and depression. Dejection may be one element of loneliness (Weiss 1980). Only one of the writers did not report depression in the mailed survey. It would be surprising if depression was not present in the texts. In earlier studies, researchers talk about the stigma or the taboo attached to loneliness (Killeen 1998, Victor et al. 2000, McInnis & White 2001). McInnis and White (2001) point out that some people think that loneliness is their own fault. Maybe this is one reason why writers wanted to give different explanations and showed that there are acceptable and understandable reasons for their loneliness.

The loneliness in the texts can be considered as occasional and on the other hand inner experience. This kind of rigid division does not do justice to the diversity of the phenomenon. However, it may elucidate the different aspects of loneliness. The lack of meaningful activity and something to do, the sense of insecurity and partly being alone are understandable and acceptable explanations for loneliness in our culture. Those things may contribute to occasional loneliness. Certain kinds of situations may induce loneliness and different situations may alleviate it. The experience of inner loneliness is different. The feelings of being an outsider and of longing may cause a loneliness which is quite independent of external circumstances. The experience of rejection and of being useless connects with the experiences of self and existence.

The writers stated that they alleviate their own loneliness by doing something. They wrote that different groups, clubs and friendship schemes can help with loneliness. This kind of loneliness is occasional. Nevertheless, it is harder to try to alleviate loneliness caused by longing for meaningful relationships which have a shared life history and the feeling of being an outsider in society. Loneliness is not simply a desire for any company (Weiss 1980), but the relationships need to be specific and important to the individual.

References

Adams K B, Sanders S, Auth E A: Loneliness and depression in independent living retirement communities: risk and resilience factors. *Aging & Mental Health* 8(6): 475-85, 2004.

Andersson L: Loneliness research and interventions: a review of the literature. *Aging & Mental Health* 2(4): 264-274, 1998.

Bondevik M, Skogstad A: The oldest old, ADL, social network, and loneliness. *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 20(3):325-343, 1998.

Burr V: An introduction to social constructionism. Routledge, London 1995.

Esterling B A, L'Abate L, Murray E J, et al.: Empirical foundations for writing in prevention and psychotherapy: mental and physical health outcomes. *Clinical Psychology Review* 19(1): 79-96, 1999.

Groom C J, Pennebaker J W: Expressive writing and health. In: Encyclopedia of health & behaviour. 1. volume, p. 326-328. Ed. Anderson N B. Sage, Thousand Oaks 2004.

Heikkinen R-L, Kauppinen M: Depressive symptoms in late life: a 10-year follow-up. Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics 38(3):239-250, 2004.

Jokinen A, Juhila K: Diskurssianalyttisen tutkimuksen kartta. In: Diskurssianalyysi liikkeessä, p. 54-97. Ed. Jokinen A, Juhila K, Suoninen E, Vastapaino, Tampere 1999.

Jylhä M: Old age and loneliness: cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses in the Tampere longitudinal study on aging. Canadian Journal on Aging 23(2): 157-168, 2004.

Killeen C: Loneliness: an epidemic in modern society. Journal of Advanced Nursing 28(4): 762-770, 1998.

Marjovu A, Pitkälä K, Routasalo P: Ikääntyneiden yksinäisyys. Senioripysäkin ryhmäterapia psykososiaalisena kuntoutuksena. Vanhustyön keskusliitto, Saarijärvi 2005.

McInnis G J, White J H: A phenomenological exploration of loneliness in the older adult. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing 15(3):128-139, 2001.

Perlman D: European and Canadian studies of loneliness among seniors. Canadian Journal on Aging 23(2): 181-188, 2004.

Perlman D, Russel D: Loneliness and health. In: Encyclopedia of health & behavior. Volume 2, p. 585-589. Ed. Andeson NB. Sage, Thousand Oaks 2004.

Pitkälä K, Mäntyranta T: Terapeuttinen kirjoittaminen. In: Ikääntyneiden yksinäisyys. Senioripysäkin ryhmäterapia psykososiaalisena kuntoutuksena, p. 24-31. Ed. Marjovu A, Pitkälä K, Routasalo P. Vanhustyön keskusliitto, Saarijärvi 2005.

Pitkälä K, Tilvis R, Huittinen V-M, et al.: Kuntoutushankkeen tausta ja suunnittelu. Vanhustyön keskusliitto, Saarijärvi 2003.

Potter J: Representing reality. Discourse rhetoric and social construction. Sage, London 1996.

Rokach A, Brock H: Loneliness and the effects of life changes. *The Journal of Psychology* 131(3): 284-298, 1997.

Rokach A, Orzeck T, Cripps J, et al.: The effects of culture on the meaning of loneliness. *Social Indicators Research* 53(1): 17-31, 2001.

Rubenstein C, Shaver P: The experience of loneliness. In: *Loneliness. A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*, p. 206-223. Ed. Peplau L A, Perlman D. Wiley Interscience, New York 1982.

Sader W A, Johnson T B: From loneliness to anomia. In: *The anatomy of Loneliness*. 2. edition, p. 34-64. Ed. Hartog J, Audy R J, Cohen Y A. International Universities Press, New York 1980.

Savikko N, Routasalo P, Tilvis RS, et al.: Predictors and subjective causes of loneliness in an aged population. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 2005 in press.

Stek M L, Vinkers D J, Gussekloo J, et al.: Is depression in old age fatal only when people feel lonely? *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 162(1):178-180, 2005.

Taylor S: Locating and constructing discourse analytic research. In: *Discourse as data. A guide for analysis*, p. 5-48. Ed. Wetherell M, Taylor S, Yates S J. Sage, London 2001.

Tiikkainen P, Heikkinen R-L, Kauppinen M: Jyväskyläläisten 80- ja 85-vuotiaiden kokema yksinäisyys, yksinäisyyteen yhteydessä olevat ja yksinäisyyttä ennustavat tekijät 5-vuotisseurauksen aikana. *Gerontologia* 18(4): 257-265, 2004.

Tijhuis M A R, de Jong-Gierveld J, Feskens E J M et al.: Changes in and factors related to loneliness in older men. *The Zutphen Elderly Study. Age and Ageing* 28(5): 491-495, 1999.

Van der Geest S: "They don't come to listen": The experience of loneliness among older people in Kwahu, Ghana. *Journal of Cross-cultural Gerontology* 19(2): 77-96, 2004.

Weiss R S: *Loneliness. The experience of emotional and social isolation*. 3. edition. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1980.

Wetherell M: Themes in discourse research: the case of Diana. In: Discourse theory and practice. A reader, p. 14-28. Ed. Wetherell M, Taylor S, Yates S J. Sage, London 2002.

Victor C, Scambler S, Bond J, et al.: Being alone in later life: loneliness, social isolation and living alone. Reviews in Clinical Gerontology 10(4): 407-417, 2000.

Vološinov V: Kielen dialogisuus. Marxismi ja kielifilosofia. Vastapaino, Tampere 1990.

Wright J, Chung M C: Mastery or mystery? Therapeutic writing: a review of the literature. British Journal of Guidance & Counselling 29(3): 277-291, 2001.