The lost *Gemeinschaft*: How people working with the elderly explain loneliness

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ABSTRACT

We conducted a qualitative interview study with people of different professions working with lonely elderly people. The rationale of the study was to examine how these respondents explain loneliness among the elderly. The present article focuses on the social explanations, i.e. explanations that identify causes of loneliness in the structure of modern society. We found that many of the social explanations given are aspects of a more encompassing and general pattern underlying all the reasoning about loneliness among the elderly. This pattern is the expression of two contrasting images of society which the classical sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies termed *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). The former refers to traditional or small-size rural communities characterized by high degrees of social cohesion, integration, solidarity, proximity and familiarity, whereas the latter refers to functional differentiation, distance, individualization, exchanged-based social relations and anonymity. Loneliness among the elderly is explained by the lack of *Gemeinschaft* and its characteristics in contemporary society. This explanatory pattern goes hand in hand with a critical view of contemporary society and a nostalgic yearning for the lost communities of past societies, where inhabitants find their staked-out place and sense of belonging, and thus loneliness hardly seems to occur. We summarized this view under the label the "lost *Gemeinschaft*".

Introduction

This article starts with two observations. *First*, much of the research on loneliness among the elderly is characterized by quantitative studies dealing with the causes and consequences of loneliness. We note that this kind of research has contributed valuable insight into factors correlating with loneliness (for example: De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Prieto-Flores, João Forjaz, Fernandez-Mayoralas, Rojo-Perez, & Martinez-Martin, 2011; Dahlberg & Mc Kee, 2013). However, we agree with some scholars (Murphy & Longino, 1992; Victor, Scambler, & Bond, 2009; Uotila, Lumme-Sandt, & Saarenheimo, 2010) that there is a need for much more research on the subject that makes use of approaches more at home in qualitative methodologies and constructionist epistemologies. *Second*, when explaining loneliness, there is too a narrow focus on lonely elderly individuals while the social environment is rather neglected. In our view, this is largely due to a lack of social and sociological views of loneliness in much of the psychological and medical literature (Victor et al., 2009: 3).

Addressing these two issues, the present article draws from a qualitative interview study on *how people who work with elderly people explain loneliness as a social problem*. In particular, the article focuses on the social explanations, i.e. explanations that identify causes of loneliness in the structure of modern society. Underlying these social explanations is a general pattern expressing two contrasting images of society which the classical sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies termed *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). The former aims at traditional/rural communities, the latter at modern urban societies. Loneliness among the elderly is explained by the lack of *Gemeinschaft* and its characteristics in contemporary society.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 gives a more detailed overview of the research field and contextualizes the rationale of the study. Section 3 introduces the epistemological

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backgrounds for the study. The methods of data collection and data analysis are presented in Section 4. Making substantial use of empirical material, Section 5 presents the wide variety of respondents' social explanations of loneliness on a descriptive level. In Section 6, the common pattern underlying these individual accounts – the contrast between the two archetypes of traditional/rural communities and modern urban societies – will be identified, explicated and linked to social theory. Section 7 provides evidence that the respondents give detrimental evaluations of these two archetypes. For them, explaining loneliness among the elderly goes hand in hand with criticizing contemporary society, which is taken as the *causa prima* of loneliness. Section 8 offers concluding remarks and some implications for research and practice.

Overview of the field and contextualization of the research problem

The concept of "loneliness" itself is subject to numerous interpretations and meanings (Dahlberg, 2007; Karnick, 2005; Long, Seburn, Averill, & More, 2003; Rosedale, 2007; Stanley et al., 2010; Uotila et al., 2010), resulting in competing definitions (Coyle & Dugan, 2012:1356) and associated operationalizations (De Jong Gierveld, 1987; Russell, 1996) in research. Its empirical substrate is said to have multiple dimensions (Michela, Peplau, & Weeks, 1982; Tornstam, 1990). One of the most influential, though not uncontested conceptualizations in the literature is the twofold division into emotional loneliness and social isolation (Weiss, 1973).

Furthermore, there is dissent on within what frame of reference loneliness should be studied; for instance it can be seen as a medical condition (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hawkley & Caccioppo, 2010; Thurston & Kubzansky, 2009), a bio-psychological state (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Perlman & Peplau, 1981), an essential aspect of human existence (Karnick, 2005: 9) or as a social problem (Uotila et al., 2010). For some researchers this incongruence might be the result of faulty definitions and invalid operationalizations. However, we argue in line with many others who are critical of the dominance of the (post-)positivist paradigm that this is not a problem created primarily by researchers. Instead the incongruence is a fundamental characteristic of the phenomenon "loneliness" itself because the meaning of loneliness differs depending on who describes it.

So far, however, the perspective of the persons describing loneliness has only been considered by a few qualitative studies, such as those of Stanley et al. (2010), Uotila et al. (2010), Dahlberg (2007), Victor et al. (2009), Graneheim and Lundman (2010), and Cloutier-Fisher, Kobayashi, and Smith (2011). The neglect of social and sociological views of loneliness in much of the psychological and medical literature reinforces a narrow focus on the perspectives of elderly individuals. The perspectives of other stakeholders involved in the loneliness of elderly people such as family members, care providers and personnel or voluntary workers are hardly studied, as Stanley et al. also observe (2010). While it is the lonely elderly themselves who suffer from the direct consequences of loneliness, it is the other groups around them that are at least co-constructors of the social reality in which loneliness and its potential remedies are found.

The research project that provides the background for our article can be justified in a similar vein: not only has the perspective of people who are active in various areas of the service sector working with lonely elderly people been neglected in the study of the different meanings of loneliness in society; also neglected is their perspective on *the causes of loneliness*. One guiding question in the overarching study is *how people who work with elderly people explain the social problem of loneliness*. Researchers with an affinity in psychometrics might immediately question the value of such a study because people's subjective reasoning will not lead to an understanding of objective causes, especially since most such causes have long been established. However, critics of quantitative and psychometric paradigms (for example: Victor et al., 2009) have convincingly argued that there is much more to be gained by studying people's accounts than merely trying to directly register the objective reality. Not only is there no such thing as an observer-independent, objective reality in the social world; even less so is there an objective view of a phenomenon that has so many different meanings as loneliness. Furthermore, subjective descriptions are expressions of how people observe the world they live in, how they make sense of it, and how they act towards it. Such a view has a long history in social thought, in particular within the interpretative paradigm (the *verstehende* sociology of Weber as well as phenomenology and symbolic interactionism). Given that the subjective meaning people give to their actions is itself highly reliant on social structures and semantics (Luhmann, 1980), we need to stress the importance of studying people's accounts of the social world with regard to their actions.

Translated into the context of care personnel, volunteers and pastors working with the elderly, it is important to study how these groups interpret the social world because it is these groups that are exposed to, deal with or take part in remedying the loneliness of elderly people. Studying the causes they identify underlying loneliness will not help us find real, objective causes, but it will help us find the subjective meaning they give to their work with the elderly, their professional environment, and especially to those who are lonely themselves. Since the meaning people provide to their actions determines how they define the situation and, thus, their willingness and their resistance to change, studying this meaning is important in assessing the potential for implementing new policy guidelines and intervention methods or providing new inspiration for their work with lonely elderly people (see also Uotila et al., 2010, p.: 24).

As will be described in more detail in the methods section, we conducted qualitative interviews with people of different professions working with lonely elderly people. The study shows that respondents provide roughly three categories of explanations—bio-medical, psychological and social. The first covers bio-medical causes such as advanced age, illness, and death of a spouse or friend; the second category involves phenomena such as depression and mental distress; examples of social explanations of loneliness are a lack of family, social network or resources. All in all, most of the bio-medical and psychological accounts respondents gave confirm findings from the research literature. There is, however, one striking insight of this study concerning the social explanations. Most of the distinctive social explanations are aspects of a more encompassing and general pattern that underlies all the reasoning on loneliness among the elderly. This pattern is the