



What are we talking about? Constructions of loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press



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ABSTRACT

Loneliness among older people is an issue that engages the general public and various professions and organizations in contemporary Swedish society. One public arena where this engagement is particularly evident is within the Swedish news-press, where articles on loneliness among older people are frequently published. Loneliness is commonly perceived as significantly related to ageing and older people. In addition, the mass media is considered to have a crucial influence in shaping general perceptions of older people. The aim of this study is to examine how loneliness among older people is constructed in the Swedish news-press and whether there is a prevailing “loneliness discourse” within this context. The empirical material consists of 94 articles from the Swedish news-press from the years 2013–2014. Two dominating discourses were found. *Loneliness – within the discourse of eldercare, politics and the welfare society*, is primarily written about in news articles and debate articles by a variety of authors, such as politicians and representatives from organizations. Within this discourse, loneliness is utilized as a concept to motivate the need for political change and the allocations of resources and to amplify deficiencies within eldercare, politics and the welfare society. The second discourse, *Loneliness – within the discourse of volunteer work*, is addressed in reportage articles written by journalists. In this discourse focus was on depicting volunteers and enhancing the importance of volunteer work. Here, loneliness serves as a motive for performing volunteer work. In addition, the discourse of *Research reports on older people's health* was found, although less significant compared to the two major discourses. Within this discourse ageing is presented as a risk, where loneliness is one of these risk factors. Despite some minor differences, loneliness, within all three discourses, is given the meaning of being a problem that needs to be solved. A central finding in this study is that focus in the articles, from Swedish news-press, is not mainly on loneliness but rather on eldercare, politics and the welfare state, volunteer work and health among older people. Loneliness is, consequently, used as a concept to motivate the need for political change and the allocation of resources for older people, to enhance the values of volunteer work and to emphasize the risks associated with ageing.

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Introduction

Loneliness among older people is a frequently discussed topic in a wide range of countries at present. Sweden, where various professions, politicians, non-governmental organizations and volunteers in various contexts are involved in this issue, is not an exception. The Swedish Red Cross, for example, operates the “*Never alone*” campaign with the objective that no one should experience loneliness and that there is a need for a more humane society (The Swedish Red Cross, 2011). In a Swedish governmental report, it is stated that contact between people is a central part of everyone's life and the glue that holds communities and the society together. In the report, it is also stated that a lack of social relations is considered to cause loneliness and isolation for the

individual and, simultaneously, on a societal level, leads to marginalization, social disintegration and diminishing trust between people (SOU, 2000:41). In the popular science magazine *Medical Science*, an in-depth article on loneliness was published in 2015 with the headline “*Loneliness – a threat to our health*”.¹ The Stockholm City mission has several projects aimed at reducing loneliness among older people, within which the main idea is: “*In a more humane society, there is room for fellowship and support in economically vulnerable situations for everyone, regardless of age. Together, we are less alone.*”² Loneliness has recently been addressed in popular culture on Swedish national television, being a topic in an episode of the program *Kobra*,³ which addresses current cultural themes, and in a program focusing on the importance of social relations, hosted by a beloved Swedish artist, Lars Lerin. In the

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¹ <http://ki.se/en/research/loneliness-a-danger-to-our-health> 160922.

² <https://www.stadsmissionen.se/vad-vi-gor/aldre> 161025. Text translated by author.

³ <http://www.svt.se/kobra/4-dec/160922>.

program, involuntary loneliness is described as lethal.⁴ In recent years, loneliness has also been addressed in the Swedish popular scientific literature, gaining substantial attention under titles such as “*The modern loneliness*” and “*To belong: on loneliness and fellowship*”.⁵

Loneliness in Sweden has also been discussed internationally since the 2015 premiere of the movie “*The Swedish theory of love*”. The premise of the movie is that the success of the Swedish welfare state is considered to create autonomous individuals, with loneliness and alienation being the downside of this success (The Guardian, 2016).⁶

Reflecting this societal engagement with loneliness in general and loneliness among older people in particular, the subject is frequently discussed in the Swedish news-press. Various professions within institutions in the welfare sector, representatives from civil society, researchers and politicians are participating in these discussions and presenting their views on loneliness among older people.

Public discussions and concerns regarding loneliness among older people, however, are not a new phenomenon in Swedish society. During the late 1940s, the nationally known author Ivar Lo Johansson conducted reportages together with a photographer to document the current situation in Swedish residential homes. One main purpose for Johansson was to document and display the loneliness among older people living in residential homes (Wersäll, 2006; Jönson, 2001). These reportages constituted the basis for the governmental report *Åldringsvårdsutredningen* (SOU, 1956:1),⁷ within which loneliness was a main theme. Thus, loneliness among older people is an issue that has been discussed over several decades. However, with the significant impact of the mass media in contemporary society and changes in the mass media context, where the development of electronic media (Thompson, 2000) is perhaps the most momentous change, presently, the discussions about loneliness among older people are more extensive and frequent.

The mass media have a significant role in shaping perceptions on and knowledge about ageing and later life (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2002). Communication in the mass media is dependent on the societal context, and the content which is communicated takes the form of symbols considered to be meaningful within the specific societal context, rather than being objective reports (Thompson, 2000). The concept of *media logic*, developed by Altheide and Snow (1979), stretches the significance of the media format and its impact on how material is organized and how a phenomenon is presented and interpreted (Altheide & Snow, 1979: pp. 9–10). Considering that loneliness is a highly present topic in Swedish society and within the Swedish news-press in particular, there is a need to examine how loneliness among older people is constructed in on-going discussions in the Swedish news-press.

To be able to analyze this topic, a social constructionist approach is considered to be most fruitful since a fundamental idea within this theoretical framework is that knowledge about the surrounding world is constructed through social processes and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). More specifically, this study is inspired by discourse theory, as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), where one central idea is that a discourse is a result of articulation, which is understood as dynamic social processes with ambitions of fixating the meaning of concepts within certain societal domains.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how loneliness among older people is constructed in the Swedish news-press and to investigate whether there is a prevailing “loneliness discourse” within the Swedish news-press. To perform a study that is in line with this overall purpose, the following questions are addressed: What discourses are prevalent in articles that address loneliness among older people? What societal

contexts are actualized in these articles? Is loneliness the main focus, or are the articles mainly writing about other issues? Are there variations regarding media formats, types of newspapers and types of articles? If so, how do these differences impact on how loneliness among older people is written about?

Central concepts

Loneliness – a complex phenomenon

The study *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* by sociologist Robert Weiss, published in 1973, is typically regarded as the starting point for loneliness research, and his division between social and emotional loneliness is recurrently used as the basis for studies on loneliness. Weiss (1973) argues that social loneliness is caused by the lack of a social network and is a result of not being included in social communities whereas emotional loneliness results from a lack of intimate relationships. Although this definition is not linked specifically to older people, it has become customary to apply this division in studies on loneliness of older people.

Loneliness is commonly defined as a negative subjective feeling that arises as a result of a discrepancy between a person's desired and actual social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Weiss, 1973). Although a standard definition, to a minor extent, it has been contested and considered to be too vague (Rook, 1984; Wood, 1986: p 189). An individual may be dissatisfied with one aspect of a social relationship but pleased with another aspect. It is also claimed that discontent with social relations does not necessarily evoke feelings of loneliness but simply dissatisfaction (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015). For example, a marriage that does not meet expectations may lead to feelings of resentment and not loneliness (Rook, 1984).

Feelings of loneliness can occur in all phases of the life course. How loneliness is experienced by the individual can vary depending on societal beliefs about what loneliness means and when loneliness may be expected to occur. Furthermore, expectations and desires for social relations are viewed as being affected by social norms, and these norms are considered to be age-related (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). The paradox of loneliness, according to Wood (1986: pp. 187–188), is that it is a non-social and, simultaneously, a social experience. Loneliness is a private experience, though social, since there has to be a consensus in society regarding the expectations of relations to be aware of what is missing.

Presently, research on loneliness among older people is extensive. Studies have been conducted within several fields of research and in different scientific disciplines. Research on loneliness among older people has predominantly been based on quantitative methods and often uses scales, for example, to study how often older people experience loneliness (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010). The prevalence of loneliness, however, has varied from 7% to 49%. The research context, method and types of questions used are some of the factors believed to contribute to these large differences. At what time of the day and year the study is performed is also believed to have an impact since feelings of loneliness are more severe during evenings, weekends and holidays (Savikko, 2008; Victor, Scambler, Bond, & Bowling, 2000). Several studies have focused on loneliness and its relationship with physical or mental health. Chronic disease, poor self-rated health, poor functional capacity, and problems with hearing and vision can all contribute to feelings of loneliness (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010). Depression and loneliness are often viewed as being correlated. However, the concepts are distinct, and it is still unclear which of the two predicts the other (O'Lunaigh & Lawlor, 2008).

Research on constructions and perceptions of older people and loneliness

There is a consensus regarding loneliness that it is part of how older people are constructed and perceived within the public sphere in general (Dykstra, 2009; Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016). However, over-viewing

⁴ <http://www.svt.se/vanligen-lars-lerin/> 160922.

⁵ The titles of these Swedish books are Karlsson, M. & Rider, S. (2006) *Den moderna ensamheten* and Strang, P. (2014) *Att höra till: om ensamhet och gemenskap*.

⁶ Guardian: Leslie Felperin, “*The Swedish Theory of Love review – A nation's obsession with self-sufficiency*”. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/23/swedish-theory-love-documentary-film-review-independence-self-sufficiency> 20160922.

⁷ In English: The Investigation of Eldercare. Translated by author.

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