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2017-05

Tiilikainen , E & Seppanen , M 2017 , ' Lost and unfulfilled relationships behind emotional loneliness in old age ' , Ageing and Society , vol. 37 , no. 5 , pp. 1068-1088 . <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16000040>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/237039>

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16000040>

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Lost and Unfulfilled Relationships Behind Loneliness in Old Age

Text: 6056 words

References: 1994 words

Total: 8051 words

ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative approach, this article examines how the experiences of loneliness are embedded in the everyday lives and relationships of older adults. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with older people who reported feeling lonely in a 2002–2012 cohort study in southern Finland.

Behind emotional loneliness, we identified lost and unfulfilled relationships, involving the *loss or lack of a partner, absence of meaningful friendship, complex parenthood* and *troubling childhood*.

Many respondents faced loneliness that only began in old age, but for some, loneliness had been present for nearly a lifetime.

The research reveals the multifaceted nature of loneliness and its causes. The meaning of lost relationships and the quiet longing for fulfilling ones are powerful factors behind emotional loneliness, and the life course paradigm should be recognised when researching loneliness in old age. Family trajectories may have a significant impact on the probability of experiencing emotional loneliness in later life.

Keywords: Loneliness, emotional loneliness, ageing, relationships, life course, qualitative, interview

Introduction

During the course of our lives, we form, maintain and rebuild relationships with family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances, some relationships ending up more meaningful than others.

Meaningful relationships are regarded as the basis of a good and dignified life, and the lack of them as a risk for loneliness (Gunnarsson 2009; Savikko 2008; Victor, Scrambler & Bond 2009).

Loneliness is often associated with old age, not in the sense of ageing per se, but with the increase of disability and the decrease of social integration that may follow (Jylhä 2004; Victor et al. 2005; Wenger et al. 1996). Loneliness is known to manifest often with depression (Jylhä & Saarenheimo 2010), increased mortality (Herlitz et al. 1998; Victor & Bowling 2012), the use of hospital emergency departments (Geller et al., 1999) and the likelihood of nursing home admission (Russell et al. 1997).

Even though the loneliness of older adults has become a broadly discussed societal topic in Finland (Saari 2010), as well as in other European countries (Victor et al. 2009), the majority of studies show that the proportion of people experiencing severe loneliness has remained about the same (Victor et al. 2005) or has even decreased (Vaarama, Moisio & Karvonen 2009). Studies have reported that up to one third of older people experience some degree of loneliness in later life (Savikko et al. 2005; Steed et al. 2007; Victor et al. 2005; Wenger & Burholt 2004), and for 3 to 9%, loneliness is a severe problem (e.g. Essex & Nam 1987; Pajunen 2011; Vaarama et al. 2009; Victor & Bowling 2012). Results from cross-sectional studies have suggested that loneliness is most common among the very old (Fees, Martin & Poon 1999; Holmén et al. 1992; Vaarama, Hakkarainen & Laaksonen 1999; Routasalo et al. 2006), but opposite results are also known (de Jong-Gierveld 1987; Haapola, Karisto & Kuusinen-James 2009).

Different pathways to loneliness have been identified; loneliness may be a continuation of a long established attribute, or it can also decrease during the course of one's life. Loneliness can be a new experience, caused by "triggers" occurring in later life, for example, losing a partner (Victor et al.

2005). Loneliness is widely understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, and its subjective nature has been emphasised (Marangoni & Ickes 1989). Despite substantial research concerning the topic, loneliness lacks a clear consensual definition. The concepts of feeling lonely, being alone and living alone are often used interchangeably (Graneheim & Lundman 2010).

Loneliness studies have frequently referred to Robert Weiss' (1973) conceptualisation of social and emotional dimensions of loneliness – emotional isolation referring to the absence of a significant other or someone to turn to, and social isolation relating to loneliness caused by a lack of a sense of belonging or dissatisfaction towards one's social network. It has been suggested that emotional loneliness refers to its qualitative aspects, with words such as *feel*, *miss* and *experience*, whereas social loneliness is more directed to quantitative aspects of relationships, with words such as *enough people*, *many people*, *my friends* or *always someone* (van Baarsen et al. 2001; Van Tilburg 1988).

Even though the subjective nature of the phenomenon is recognised, research concerning loneliness has been focused on its prevalence and predictive factors. The studies are based on quantitative data measuring loneliness by using a single question with a rating response scale (see, for example, Nummela, Seppänen & Uutela 2011; Victor et al. 2005) or different multidimensional scales (see de Jong-Gierveld & Raadschelders 1982; Russell 1982). Despite the influence of Weiss' (1973) conceptualisation and the fact that the distinction between social and emotional loneliness may be particularly relevant among older people, for whom the probability of having an intimate attachment figure decreases with age (van Baarsen et al. 2001), relatively little research on correlates of loneliness has distinguished between the social and emotional dimensions of loneliness. Research that has addressed this distinction has found that factors diverge in their levels of association with the two dimensions (Dahlberg & McKee 2013).

Longitudinal studies have identified groups of seniors for whom loneliness decreases, as well as those for whom loneliness increases (see Victor & Bowling 2012), and have aimed to understand

the causal relationship between life events and loneliness in order to alleviate negative consequences (e.g. Aartsen & Jylhä 2011; Routasalo & Pitkälä 2003). Despite the large amount of research concerning loneliness, there has only been a small number of qualitative studies on the topic (see Dahlberg 2010; Graneheim & Lundman 2010; Heravi-Karimooi et al. 2010; Kirkevold et al. 2013; McInnis & White 2001; Stanley et al. 2010; Uotila 2011), and arguments for using a mixed-methods approach have been advanced (Kvaal, Halding & Kvigne 2014; Victor et al. 2009).

Qualitative studies concerning loneliness in old age have highlighted the different dimensions and meanings of loneliness (Stanley et al. 2010; Uotila 2011) and its negative influence on the everyday lives of the elderly (Heravi-Karimooi et al. 2010). For example, Graneheim and Lundman (2010) have pointed out the complex experiences of loneliness in old age, referring to the impacts of past, present and future relations; however, in contrast to quantitative studies (e.g. Bishop & Martin 2007; Hawkey & Cacioppo 2007; Hensley et al. 2012, life course perspectives have been scarcely used when analysing qualitative data on loneliness.

The life course paradigm assumes that individuals build their future on the basis of the constraints and opportunities experienced in the past. The process is recurring and cumulative, since initial advantages or disadvantages are often amplified with time (Giele & Elder 1998). Life courses are embedded in different times and locations and affected by the social context in which individuals live (Barban 2011). For example, experiences in working life may have an effect on health and wellbeing in later life (Singh-Manoux et al. 2004). Family trajectories also play an important role in different health and wellbeing outcomes (see Barban 2011).

This article aims to examine how the experiences of loneliness are embedded in the past and present everyday lives of older adults. Using a qualitative approach, we study the lived experiences of seniors and the meanings they give to their loneliness. Our interest lies in emotional loneliness, even though loneliness in old age is often examined through social isolation (Victor et al. 2005: 31–40), and arguments against focusing on only one type of loneliness have been made (Van Tilburg

1988). For example, Dahlberg and McKee (2013) emphasised the importance of examining social and emotional loneliness separately in order to prevent or reduce loneliness; understanding the different natures of loneliness is needed before effective intervention policies and strategies can be developed. In our article, we ask why emotional loneliness occurs and how the experiences of loneliness are embedded in one's life course.

Methods

Our article has its origins in the quantitative study, "Good Ageing in Lahti region" (GOAL), carried out in Päijät-Häme, a hospital district of 15 municipalities located in southern Finland. In the GOAL study, three birth cohorts (1946–1950, 1936–1940 and 1926–1930) had been followed in 2002, 2005, 2008 and 2012. The baseline assessment of the cohort study included two extensive questionnaires and clinical measures. On the topic of loneliness, the respondents were asked a single question, "Do you feel lonely?" with five alternative answers: "never," "seldom," "occasionally," "often" and "all the time." In 2008, only a handful (3%) of the two oldest cohorts reported being lonely often or all the time (Table 1). Among the respondents who reported being lonely, those who had given their address information (N=39) were contacted by mail and invited to an interview to discuss the topic of loneliness further.

Insert table 1 here.

In this article, we analyse the qualitative data gathered between the last two follow-ups of GOAL. The data consists of ten in-depth interviews conducted in 2010. All of the interviewees reported feeling lonely often or all the time in the questionnaire that they answered in 2008. Four of them were women and six were men (Table 1). They were 70 to 84 years old, with different backgrounds: widowed, divorced, unmarried or living with a partner, and they lived in different types of neighbourhoods: countryside, center of the city or suburbia.

Eight of the interviews occurred at the respondents' homes; two men were interviewed at an office space, upon their request. The interviews lasted from one to three hours, and they were all recorded.

The recorded material was transcribed into approximately 200 written pages. In this article, the names of the interviewees have been changed, and other information that could lead to their identification has been removed. The research has received ethical clearance from the ethics committee of the hospital district of Päijät-Häme.

With a multistage procedure and a data-driven approach, the data was coded (Flick 2009: 318–323) into different themes in order to investigate why loneliness occurs, what the experiences are behind loneliness and how they are embedded in previous life events or the present everyday lives of older people.

Results

The reasons for loneliness were pondered in different ways; some of the interviewees went a long way back in their life histories, while others talked about their current everyday lives. Occasionally, loneliness was referred to as an inevitable part of ageing, but for all, loneliness was primarily a personal experience that had built up due to different life events they encountered. The cause of loneliness was ambiguous; it was an outcome of different factors intertwined in the past and present everyday lives of the interviewees.

Behind emotional loneliness, we identified four types of experiences, which we describe as lost and unfulfilled relationships: *loss or lack of a partner*, *absence of meaningful friendship*, *complex parenthood* and *troubling childhood*. In the following sections, we provide deeper insights into these experiences, as described by the interviewees.

Loss or lack of a partner

Several research findings have emphasised the link between widowhood and loneliness (Victor et al. 2005: 370). Anja, aged 82, lost her husband a few years ago. At the time of the interview, she lived alone in the countryside in a big house built by her husband. Memories of the couple's life together were present every day.

During the 61 years together, you get used to the person next to you. You know his ways so well. And he was a kind man. Never lost his temper or went on about little things. Such a special character. Now I see it. I took it for granted, and now I miss him so much. Just two old people living happily together. That I really miss.

Anja talked about their everyday life. She missed the way they did everything together in their own particular way (see also Andersson 2007). After her husband passed away, Anja sometimes found herself talking to him. In her mind, she was sitting at the table, eating breakfast across from her husband, just like old times. Nights went by with her crying and screaming. Anja felt sad, angry and guilty.

Anja's husband passed away suddenly, and she felt unprepared for the loss. Years before, Anja had prayed that she wouldn't have to be the one left alone; she wasn't the stronger one, she thought. Although she had gotten used to living alone, she missed her husband's presence every day. Seeing friends made the sorrow go away, but only for a while. At the end of the day, there was an empty house waiting, with all of the memories in it. Anja said that loneliness was a stranger in her past life, but now it was present every day.

Heikki, aged 83, also lost his partner a few years ago. Heikki's wife suffered from Alzheimer's disease and was in a nursing home for nearly ten years. Before that, Heikki had taken care of her at home. The years as a caregiver were difficult and wearing on him, and it was a great relief when a place was obtained for her at the nursing home. But even then, Heikki didn't give up his role as a caregiver; he visited her every day.

Heikki had always hoped that he could take care of his wife until the end, and he felt that he succeeded in the task, which he described as the most important one in his life. Similar to Anja, Heikki also lived in the countryside in the same house where he lived with his wife. The adaptation to the loss had begun years before, when they had found out about his wife's disease, but after she passed away, life became meaningless, and Heikki had started to wonder whether there was still a

place for him in the world (see also Hooyman & Kiyak 1991; Sarvimäki, Stenbock-Hult & Heimonen 2010).

After she died and everything was taken care of, I felt so useless. I told everyone I was ready to go.

For both Heikki and Anja, widowhood had meant not only emotional loneliness but also social isolation, being alone in a house they used to share with a loved one. Their loneliness was based on longing for something lost, for the life they used to have.

For Eini, an 81-year-old widow, loneliness reminded her of what life could have been.

Maybe if he had lived another 10 or 12 years, I would be different now. We had just started a new life together. The boys were away but visited a lot. Every Christmas we spent here together. Life had meaning. Now there's nothing.

Eini lost her husband 15 years ago, just a few years after they had both retired. Life felt good; they both seemed healthy and were renovating their summer cottage together. Eini's husband passed away soon after a cancer diagnosis. Since his death, Eini had stayed at the apartment where they moved together 30 years ago. The building had no elevator, and she lived on the second floor. Over the past years, Eini's declining health had restricted her mobility, and at the same time, several friends had passed away. She got help from her two sons, but the quality of her everyday life at home had decreased. Eini was struggling to get by on her own, and the cause of loneliness seemed clear for her. *"Your life companion should be there for you longer,"* Eini said.

In Eini's case, loneliness had originated not only from the loss of a companion, but also from the loss of mobility as her health declined. For an older adult living alone, just maintaining, let alone building new relationships, can be extremely challenging due to the decrease of physical function (Drageset 2004; Victor et al. 2005). Next we examine the hopes of finding new relationships.

Divorced and widowed men, more than women, are known to adapt more easily to the loss of a partner and to benefit from a new relationship. Finding a new companion is especially in the interest of men who miss the care and attention of a spouse, which might have been taken for granted before (de Jong-Gierveld 2004). This can also be understood from Lauri's experience with loneliness.

Lauri, aged 81, lived alone in a block of apartments in the centre of a fairly large city. He was single, having been divorced in the 1970s. Since then, he had several relationships, but for the past few years, he had been without a partner. Lauri said that he just hadn't found the right person.

Loneliness came to mind, especially in the evenings.

Lauri: Days go by okay, but in the evenings, I miss company.

Elisa: Whose company do you miss the most? A lady friend?

Lauri: Well, of course, a lady friend. They're harder to find. (laughs)

A bit amused, he continued to relate that he felt lonely not only in the evening, but also when chores had to be done, and bills had to be paid. Lauri said that he wasn't lonely when he was younger, even though nothing much had really changed since then. Lady friends had come and gone, but "*Now when you're older, you have the time to think about it, and you realise that you're lonely,*" he admitted. If the right person came along, Lauri might even get married again someday. Jonathan Drennan et al. (2008) found that among those who have never been married or are divorced, the experience of emotional or "romantic" loneliness is common. Among the widowed interviewees, only Eini brought up the topic of a new partner (but from a different point of view than that of Lauri, who was seeking a new spouse).

I haven't been interested in other men. After my brother died, his wife went on about her adventures with other men and kept asking me why I don't find someone too. I always said I'm not interested in men anymore. I'm interested in good friends among other women.

The idea of finding a new partner was strange for Eini, who had been alone for 15 years, although

she had friends who had repartnered in old age after bereavement. Even though it had become more and more common for seniors to build new relationships after a divorce or the loss of a partner, for Eini, a new intimate relationship, even living-apart-together (LAT) (de Jong-Gierveld 2004; Karlsson 2006; Koskimäki 2010, was not an option. In Eini's age cohort, less than 4% of those who are divorced, unmarried or widowed are currently in a new relationship but living apart. In younger age cohorts, born 1946–1950, up to one quarter (20–29%) are in a LAT relationship (Karisto, Koskimäki & Seppänen 2013).

Absence of meaningful friendship

After Eini's husband passed away, friends took on an important role in her everyday life. She enjoyed inviting friends over, but after her major surgery last year, she had to lie down a lot and could not even pour a cup of coffee for a friend. Eventually, she felt better, but no one visited. Eini believed that her poor health frightened people. Now that leaving home was difficult, friends would be most needed. Eini missed the friends she had lost. They were women living in the neighbourhood, with whom Eini could sit on the bench outside and just talk for hours. Now she was the only one left.

Older adults are known to value relationships with friends their own age, and meaningful social contacts are an important part of wellbeing (Holmén & Furukawa 2002; Victor et al. 2009). In addition to wellbeing, loneliness is most often associated, not with the number of contacts with friends and family, but with the quality of these relationships, that is, the expectations from and satisfaction with the contacts (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra 2006; Routasalo et al. 2006). Hence, the longing for a friend is not always explained by losses and therefore by the decrease of network size, which for many is inevitable in old age. One might have friends and acquaintances, but the relationships are not always the kind that one hopes for. Lauri, introduced earlier, described another unfulfilled relationship. He had an old friend whom he had known for years. They used to go fishing and dancing together, but after his friend got married and moved farther away to the

countryside, the relationship changed.

It bothers me a little bit that even though we have known [each other] for many years, he never invites me to his place. He has a car and everything, so he could give me a lift. Warm up the sauna and spend the evening just talking. But he's not that kind of a friend. He comes by my place, but I can't go there.

For Lauri, the friendship he described was important, but it did not live up to his expectations. Lauri felt that the relationship existed on his friend's terms and lacked reciprocity, which he considered an important part of friendship. The fact that his friend had not invited him over after settling down with his new partner made Lauri feel unwanted and no more a part of his friend's life. Similar findings have been made among single, middle-aged men (Virtanen 2009). The unfulfilled expectations from contacts with friends have been discovered as one of the most powerful independent associations with loneliness (Savikko 2008).

In a longitudinal study, Johnson and Troll (1994) tracked the friendship patterns of seniors who were 85 years old and over and found that the expressive and affective dimensions of friendship were minimised. The elderly appreciated the companionship and laughter that friendship provided, but friends did not necessarily function as confidants. Samter (2003) suggested that individuals in the latter stages of old age appear to define friendship in distinctly different ways. Friendship is no longer rooted in intimacy and support, and the boundaries of who might qualify as a friend are expanded. In older age, "talk for talk's sake" may increase (Samter 2003: 661–667).

Nonetheless, the emotional aspect of friendship appears essential; talking for talk's sake is not enough to fill the void of the lack of a meaningful relationship behind the loneliness. In particular, the men interviewed described a need for warm friendship, as Aatos, aged 83, expressed it:

Mostly I miss warm friendship. Someone you can talk to about everything. A really good friend.

Olavi, aged 80, was married, but his wife had been at a nursing home for several years. Days would often go by when Olavi sat around in coffee shops, where he usually found someone to chat with. But most of all, he missed a friend with whom he could travel and see the world, when it was still possible. Finding the right kind of friend was not easy, but Olavi had not given up hope.

I don't really have a friend I could visit or who could come by my place. I haven't found one, although I've tried. You're just not at the same wavelength with everyone. But you just have to stay optimistic about it.

The other men interviewed were not as optimistic about finding meaningful friendships. Aatos, divorced in the 1970s, lived alone in the centre of a small town. His daughter lived nearby, but they rarely saw each other. Sore legs had started to bother Aatos, and especially in the wintertime, walking had become difficult. Aatos had a lot of acquaintances in the neighbourhood where he had lived almost all his life, but he was not that keen on befriending everyone (see also Zechner & Sointu 2009).

There are not many whom you like being with. There are some people whom you can't get rid of when you meet them outside. They just talk and talk and don't stop. You have to tell them many times that it's too cold to stand out here. (laughs)

Vilho, aged 81, lived alone in a small town, where he moved from the countryside nine years ago. Vilho had poor hearing and did not go out much, but his next-door neighbour had kept him busy, not always in a good way.

He comes by almost every day. He buys a little bottle of liquor and just babbles. I don't really like it that much.

Samter (2003: 666) pointed out that even though the criteria for defining friends become more liberal in old age, the willingness to tolerate a difficult companion decreases, as reflected in both Vilho's and Aatos' experiences. Rather than being pleased with any kind of social interaction, they

felt annoyed with meaningless relationships in which they had not found needed companions. For Vilho, social interaction was challenging because of his loss of hearing. Keeping up with other people's talk was difficult, especially if the other person did not articulate clearly and "just babbled." For Vilho, there was a crowd, but recently, that had not been a problem; times had changed, and people did not visit as they used to. Vilho missed the days when neighbours were close, and everyone used to greet one another when walking on the sidewalks.

Complex parenthood

Among the interviewees, both Heikki and Aatos lost children in accidents over 30 years ago. Heikki briefly brought up the loss of his son and said that his sister's grandchildren visited him occasionally. He felt blessed that he had kin, but since his wife's death, Heikki had started to wonder what would happen to the house when he was gone. He believed it would be torn down because there was no one to whom he could leave it.

I'm not jealous of my own family [sisters], but honestly, I'm jealous of the people who don't understand how precious it is to have offspring.

An older person with no offspring often faces more losses than the absence of new relationships; not having children means not having grandchildren (Aartsen et al. 2004). Being a grandparent can be one of the most important roles in one's lifetime. It means not only belonging to a chain of generations but also knowing that one's own life continues in others' (Eräsaari 2002: 13). The lack of grandchildren can feel overwhelming, as it sometimes had for Anja. She had a son who was childless, which made Anja sad. She believed that life would have more meaning with grandchildren in it.

Anneli, aged 72, had never been married and had no children. She mentioned her childlessness when recalling the times she felt most lonely. Anneli described the previous Sunday, which happened to be Easter, when kids were running around the neighbourhood:

My neighbours have kids and grandkids coming by, but I don't have anyone who would stop by like that.

Although seeing other people with families made Anneli feel lonely, she added that it still would not be nice to have them visiting all the time. Anneli had heard that kids and grandkids had become a burden to some of her friends. In the GOAL study follow-up of 2012, up to 13% of women aged 62–66 years said that grandchildren did not bring joy to life; ten years earlier, only 2% thought so (Karisto et al. 2013). In older age groups, this trend was not found, which might indicate the changing expectations from social contacts with children and grandchildren.

Not having children may be a cause of loneliness (see also Linneman & Leene 1990; Zhang & Hayward 2001), but being a parent does not always protect one from being lonely. As in friendship, in parenthood one may have unfulfilled hopes of a different kind of relationship with children and grandchildren. Helmi, aged 73, wished that her son and grandchildren would keep in touch with her more often. Helmi's son lived nearby with his family, but their hectic lifestyle made Helmi feel that they had no time for her.

I called them today; they're both working. And all the time renovating their place. They bought an old house. I haven't been there for ages. They never invite me. Maybe they're always working.

Helmi emphasised that she was not angry or bitter, because her son and daughter-in-law did help with household chores and other practical things when they had the time. However, Helmi spent holidays such as Christmas alone. The practical support Helmi was given had been insufficient to fulfill her expectations of the relationships; most of all, she missed spending time with her son and grandchildren and feeling a part of their family. Savikko (2008) also argued, based on her study's results, that loneliness is associated with expectations from and satisfaction with one's contacts and not so much with the frequency of contacts or the number of significant others.

Pauli, aged 70, lived with his wife in the city. He had three children, but he did not see them that much. They all lived an hour's drive from Pauli and were unable to visit him. He was on good terms with his children but felt that something was missing. For Pauli, the relationship with his sons-in-law particularly seemed troubling.

I speak on the phone with my oldest [son] almost every day, but not with the others. I didn't really get good sons-in-law. They don't have time for this old man. (laughs) Haven't asked me to go fishing with them.

Pauli talked about things he would like to do with his son and sons-in-law. He had a summer cottage, but no one seemed to have the time to go fishing with him or to help with the yard work. For Pauli, these unfulfilled expectations came to mind when talking about loneliness, yet he found the cause of loneliness way back from his childhood.

Troubling childhood

The loss of a parent and a childhood home can be difficult to overcome, even in adulthood, when one has one's own children (Palkeinen 2005: 116). For generations who lost their parents during the war, this can be a common experience (Roos 1987). Pauli described the loss of his mother, which had an effect not only on his expectations for his own parenthood but also on his self-confidence. As a child, Pauli felt like an outsider. His father remarried, and Pauli had to spend several summers working in the countryside far away from home.

I was lonely even as a little kid. It didn't feel like home. I spent five long summers there, and every time I came back home, I didn't have any friends because I had been gone for so long. And at school, there was this boy who had the same name as mine, and the teacher started calling me by my second name, which I didn't like at all. My name was Pauli, but the teacher called me Sakari. And at the summer place, I was called little Pauli because there was also another boy called Pauli. So I had three names.

Sarvimäki et al. (2010) mentioned a vulnerability of the mind that in old age is connected to one's life course. The outcomes of previous life events shape the way the present and the future are met, sometimes with high hopes and sometimes with fears. This can also be recognised in Pauli's experience of loneliness, which he had been unable to shake off despite having a life companion and children of his own. Pauli believed that the fear of being left alone was still present because of the loss of his mother, and it had been a burden on his relationships.

The significance of childhood experiences for later experiences of loneliness has been discussed, referring, for example, to John Bowlby's (1971) ideas of the relationship between loneliness and problems in early attachment. However, some recent empirical findings do not support the causal relationship (Savikko 2008: 58), referring to the possibility of compensating for parental loss with other adult relationships.

Among the interviewees, Aatos and Anneli also briefly reviewed their childhood. Similar to Pauli, Aatos lost his mother when he was young. His father remarried, but he felt that he never got the affection he needed from his stepmother. Aatos said he felt abandoned and an outsider in his childhood home. Anneli – ten years younger than Aatos – recalled her insecurity in early childhood. Finland was at war, and Anneli's mother struggled with taking care of small children and household chores on her own. She fell into severe depression, and Anneli remembered taking responsibility for her younger siblings at a very young age.¹ Even though Anneli's mother recovered from depression, and they had a good relationship until her mother passed away, Anneli felt that her mother's depression had followed her throughout her life.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we have examined loneliness in old age and the past and present experiences behind it. Interviews with ten older adults who reported feeling lonely often or all the time have drawn a picture of the multifaceted nature of loneliness and its causes. Table 2 summarises our findings into

¹This fact came up during a second interview with Anneli in 2012.

the four factors that we identified behind emotional loneliness: loss or lack of a partner, absence of meaningful friendship, complex parenthood and troubling childhood. The life events, everyday life impacts and the emotional experiences behind these lost and unfulfilled relationships are also described.

Insert table 2 here.

Some of the interviewees had lost a companion or a child, or a parent in their own childhood.

Meaningful relationships had ended, and expectations had not always been fulfilled. These seniors sought a new partner or a good friend, or they missed the company of children and grandchildren.

Friends and family members had passed away, and new relationships had not been found, due to increased disabilities or sometimes just not being on the “same wavelength.” Many had faced loneliness that only began in old age, but for some, loneliness had been present for nearly a lifetime.

When conceptualising loneliness, Weiss (1973) emphasised the meaning of an attachment figure, whose absence or loss can only be compensated by another intimate bond. The significance of an available partner in a relationship or a close confidant for one’s wellbeing has been stressed by several researchers (van Baarsen et al. 2001). This has also been found in our study; emotional loneliness occurred for most of the respondents because of the absence of or dissatisfaction with a close bond: partner, friend, parent or child. The relationships described behind loneliness were not always lost; hence, existing and also non-existing types were examined as unfulfilling relationships.

Kirkevold et al. (2013) pointed out that there can also be considerable differences in the way seniors handle their life situations. Some view losses as normal and participate in meaningful activities, connect to other people and thrive in their own company. Others struggle to create meaning in their lives; they are overwhelmed by losses and have problems in finding meaningful activities and difficulties in maintaining social relations. Lopata’s (1969) early studies noted that even after 11 years of bereavement, loneliness was still the most serious problem for widowed. Moreover, as our findings have shown, the loss of a parent in early childhood has meant a lifetime of loneliness for

others. Our study's results emphasise the recognition of the life course paradigm when researching loneliness in old age. Family trajectories may especially have a significant impact on the probability of experiencing emotional loneliness in later life.

The definition of loneliness may vary, but there is a general agreement on the importance of the quality (not the number) of relationships. This has also been evident in our research but from a complementary approach: the meaning of lost relationships and the quiet longing for fulfilling ones are manifested as powerful factors behind emotional loneliness in old age. Due to the increase of their disabilities and the decrease of their social integration, the interviewees have referred to loneliness as an inevitable part of ageing, but the cause of loneliness is equivocal. Above all, loneliness is a personal experience embedded in previous life events and the present everyday life surrounding the seniors. Although only a minority of the elderly experience deep and severe loneliness, it creates a serious threat to wellbeing in old age. Different interventions for alleviating loneliness have been developed, and some characteristics for successful programmes have been identified (Jylhä & Saarenheimo 2010); however, an in-depth understanding is required about the quality and diversity of the experiences of loneliness.

Acknowledgments

We thank our fellow researchers working in GOAL research project at Palmenia, University of Helsinki, especially Antti Karisto, Professor of Social Gerontology. The GOAL research project has been funded by European Union and Päijät-Häme Hospital District.

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Table 1. From questionnaire to interviews: the number of participants and non-respondents (N)

	Participants in the cohort study 2008	Lonely often or all the time	Invited to an interview by mail	No response	Interviewed in 2010
<hr/>					
Born 1926–1930					
Men	239	9	7	2	5
Women	258	9	7	5	2
Born 1936–1940					
Men	377	10	5	4	1
Women	437	11	10	8	2
Total	1311	39	29	19	10

Table 2. Lost and unfulfilled relationships behind emotional loneliness in old age

	Loss or Lack of a Partner	Absence of Meaningful Friendship	Complex Parenthood	Troubling Childhood	
Life events	Widowhood	Loss of a friend	Loss of one's child	Loss of one's mother	
	Divorce	Changes in friendship due to changing circumstances (e.g. moving to a different neighbourhood or friend finding a partner)	Trouble with own children	Mother's depression	
	Staying single		No children or grandchildren	Experiences during war time	
Impacts on everyday life	Loss of sharing and doing activities together	Lifelong difficulties in finding meaningful friendship	Unfulfilled expectations	Struggling with identity	
		Unfulfilled expectations	Lack of emotional support	Painful memories	
		No one to share joys and sorrows with	No one to spend time with		
		No one to share affection with			
Emotional experiences	Painful memories	Disappointment	Feeling of redundancy	Grief	
	Grief	Poor feeling of togetherness	Disappointment	Rootlessness	
	Feeling of redundancy		Lack of continuity in chain of generations	Fear of being alone	
	Longing for affection			Insecurity	