

CASE STUDY: SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN LATER LIFE

Social exclusion is a widespread concern that significantly impacts the overall well-being and quality of life of the elderly (Nilsen et al., 2022). According to Prattley et al. (2020), elderly individuals who have endured persistent challenges over their lifetimes are prone to social exclusion. Sumil-Laanemaa et al. (2021) defined social exclusion as the complex interplay of various elements and processes that impede an individual's personal welfare and, as a result, prevent their ability to effectively and equitably engage in society. Multiple risk factors for social exclusion in elderly individuals have been found through studies, including unfortunate life circumstances such as the loss of a spouse (Lee, 2020 & Fakoya et al., 2020); poor health (Lee, 2020; Fakoya et al., 2020 & Sacker et al., 2017); retirement (Nilsen et al., 2020); and economic inequalities (Walsh et al., 2017 & Piwovar & Dzikuć, 2021). By means of an intriguing case study involving Barbara, a seventy-six years old widow residing in a village, this essay evaluates the notion of social exclusion in later life.

Barbara, who was previously an engaged community member and retired educator with a vibrant social life, is currently experiencing a growing sense of isolation due to the demise of her spouse and alterations in her social connections. Separation from her community and feelings of isolation have resulted from the substitution of her once-active lifestyle for a routine that primarily consists of gardening and reading. The case of Barbara exemplifies the complex and diverse aspects of social exclusion that affect the elderly. This essay explores the intricate impact of social exclusion on the development of elderly individuals, such as Barbara, and its cognitive, emotional, and social ramifications, using insights from various psychological frameworks. Equally important, potential approaches to mitigate the adverse consequences of social exclusion, with a particular focus on the value of developing inclusive settings and supportive networks for the elderly will also be discussed in the essay.

Cognitive Effect

Cognitive health emerges as a critical concern with increasing importance as individuals age (Murman, 2015), exerting an impact on daily functioning, independence, and overall quality of life (Erickson et al., 2022). According to Murman (2015), there are several factors that can influence the decline of cognitive abilities, including memory, attention, and decision-making, as individuals age. One of the factors that has gained considerable attention

is social exclusion, as an increasing body of evidence indicates that it negatively impacts both physical and mental well-being, specifically cognitive function decline and heightened risk of dementia (Röhr et al., 2020; Palmer, 2019; Shen et al., 2022 & Lara et al., 2019). Evan et al. (2020) study reveals a strong link between socially excluded factors and cognitive decline in elderly individuals, emphasising the importance of social engagement in cognitive health. Furthermore, Shen et al. (2022) discovered that socially isolated individuals had smaller grey matter volumes in brain regions responsible for memory and learning. Hence, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) as well as Cognitive Reserve (CR) offers significant insights to the comprehension of the cognitive implications.

The cognitive effects of social exclusion on continued development can be explained through Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) which provides a historical psychological perspective. SST posits that as people age, they develop a greater propensity for selectiveness in their social connections, giving priority to those that hold emotional significance (Cartensen, 2021 & Giasson et al., 2019). Individuals prioritise goals that enhance emotional well-being and focus on personal connections when their time becomes more constrained, especially in later life (Charles & Catensen, 2010). Nevertheless, the disruption of these connections caused by social exclusion may result in a reduction in both motivation and cognitive stimulation (Baumeister et al., 2002). Moreover, the absence of social interaction could affect one's feeling of purpose and belonging (Orben et al., 2020), hence reducing the motivation to participate in these activities. Thus, when seen through the perspective of SST, it becomes evident that social exclusion has the potential to generate a detrimental loop that impedes cognitive growth. Cardona and Andres (2023) concluded that loneliness and isolation can have a negative impact on cognitive function by reducing the enjoyment and involvement in activities that were previously engaging. This limits possibilities for mental engagement and stimulation, which can possibly lead to cognitive decline. Hence, Barbara's avoidance of dancing and travelling reflects SST, which argues prioritising emotionally relevant relationships might affect cognitive stimulation.

Nevertheless, the notion of Cognitive Reserve (CR) theory provides a valuable perspective for comprehending the cognitive consequences of social exclusion. According to CR theory, lifelong participation in intellectually stimulating activities provides individuals with the fortification they need to withstand cognitive declines (Stern, 2012; Ingram et al., 2021 & Evans et al., 2019). As social exclusion deprives individuals like Barbara of

stimulating social interactions and activities, it can have an effect on cognitive reserve. The correlation between social isolation and cognitive performance in old age is supported by the result of a study conducted by Duan et al. (2023). This finding aligns with prior research that has shown a negative association between cognitive decline in older adults such as dementia. In addition, social exclusion may potentially exacerbate stress and negative emotions, both of which are known to impair cognitive function and neural plasticity, as concluded by Brandt et al. (2022). Brandt et al. (2022) also highlighted that alterations in brain structure and function, as well as cognitive impairment, have been associated with chronic stress. In summary, social exclusion has a dual impact on cognitive reserve and stress levels, underscoring the complex interplay between social connectedness and long-term cognitive health.

Emotional Effect

Social exclusion among the elderly frequently results in significant emotional implications, with loneliness as a prominent outcome (Fakoya et al., 2020). A study by O'Súilleabháin et al. (2019) also concluded that emotional loneliness is associated with mortality in very old adults who live alone. Christiansen et al. (2021) defined loneliness as a distressing emotional condition that arises when a person feels that their degree of social interaction does not meet their desired level. Loneliness may be expressed through emotions such as hopelessness and sadness, and it may result in a deterioration of mental health, leading to symptoms of anxiety and depression (Yanguas et al., 2018). In fact, a study conducted by Liu et al. (2014) discovered a direct correlation between loneliness and depression in elderly people. The findings indicate that older individuals who experience high levels of loneliness are more prone to develop depressive symptoms. These emotional effects of social exclusion among elderly can be further explained through the lens of James-Lange theory (1885) and attachment theory (1969).

Considering Barbara's scenario, the James-Lange theory (1885) of emotions provides a perspective to comprehend the emotional consequences of social exclusion, such as feelings of loneliness. According to the idea, emotions play a crucial role in understanding and interpreting the things we encounter in our surroundings. Also, our own reflection and introspection contribute to the formation of our emotional experiences (Stanojlović et al., 2021; Northoff, 2008). In accordance with Stanojlović et al. (2021), stimulatory events lead to physical responses, and our awareness of these responses forms our emotions. In this

context, Barbara's social exclusion acts as a stimulus that triggers physiological reactions, including fatigue and an elevated need for sleep. Her understanding of these physical reactions as indications of loneliness influences her emotional perception of feeling alone and excluded from her social group. On the contrary, the James-Lange theory emphasises the influence of the immediate physiological reactions on emotions, whereas attachment theory by John Bowlby (1969) focuses on the impact of past relationships and attachment connections on present emotional experiences.

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969), suggests that individuals naturally form intimate emotional connections with others, starting in infancy and persisting throughout their lives for assurance, comfort, and emotional support (Flaherty & Sadler, 2011). As explained by Vedder et al. (2022) and Krueger et al. (2023), social exclusion and the absence of significant others, may trigger emotions of loneliness, sadness, and despair. Barbara's loneliness and isolation stem from the loss of her primary attachment bond after her spouse's death, potentially worsening her depression and anxiety symptoms. The study done by Freak-Poli et al. (2022) indicates an important connection between widowhood and increased experiences of loneliness, accompanied by reduced levels of social support. Individuals who have become widowed are 5.2 times more likely to often experience loneliness compared with those who remain in a relationship. This supports the attachment theory, highlighting the importance of emotional bonds in reassurance and comfort. In widowhood, lack of a spouse can intensify loneliness and isolation, emphasising the long-term significance of emotional bonds (Jiao et al., 2023). As demonstrated by the growing sense of loneliness and isolation during widowhood, attachment theory concludes that intimate emotional connections remain indispensable for all aspects of life. This highlights the pervasive influence that attachment bonds have on both emotional health and social support. Hence, although both theories contribute to the understanding of the emotional effect of social exclusion, they offer different perspectives regarding the fundamental processes that drive the emotional reaction.

Social Effect

The physiological and behavioural well-being of humans can be adversely affected by extended periods of isolation, despite the fact that social behaviour is vital for numerous organisms. One notable effect is the diminished engagement in social activities encountered by elderly (Walsh et al., 2017). As identified by Arzate-Mejía et al. (2020), continuous social

exclusion has a negative influence on both physical and mental health. This is due to specific biochemical pathways that affect behaviour and increase the risk of inactivity. Furthermore, as they experience growing and detachment from their social networks, they frequently begin to withdraw from activities and engagements that they formerly enjoyed (Jose & Cherayi, 2016). Hence, separation from the broader community not only diminishes opportunities for social interaction but also cultivates sentiments of loneliness and detachment (Huxhold et al., 2022). The social effects of social exclusion among elderly can be more comprehensively clarified by applying psychological frameworks, which illuminate the complex dynamics between their well being and social connectedness in their later years.

A valuable framework for comprehending the social consequences of social exclusion on ongoing development is social comparison theory by Leon Festinger (1954). The concept of social comparison, as defined by Festinger in 1954, pertains to the cognitive process of evaluating information concerning oneself in relation to one or more other individuals (Gerber et al., 2018; Halliwell, 2012 & Lee, 2022). When individuals, especially older adults like Barbara, face social isolation, they frequently engage in comparisons with others to assess their social status and overall welfare. This procedure can have substantial consequences for their continuous growth. Moreover, extended social isolation can result in a sense of inadequacy and loneliness when individuals compare themselves to others who have lively social lives (Burholt et al., 2020). Burholt et al. (2020) concluded that this can hamper their capacity to establish new relationships or engage in social activities, obstructing their social and emotional growth. Hence, social comparison theory provides valuable understanding of how social exclusion contributes to the development of feelings of inadequacy and loneliness, which in turn impede the formation of new relationships and social and emotional growth for individuals such as Barbara. Conversely, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory presents a more comprehensive perspective by defining lifetime developmental stages.

Erikson's psychosocial phases outline an individual's life, each marked by a unique developmental challenge or crisis (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The stage of “Ego Integrity vs Despair”, the eighth stage, which usually takes place in late adulthood (Lane & Munday, 2017), is highly significant. During this time, individuals assess their lives and determine whether they have attained integrity or despair. Ego integrity refers to a sense of wholeness and contentment resulting from conflict resolution and fulfilment, while despair is a profound

feeling of hopelessness and discontent (Dezutter et al., 2020 & van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020). This evaluation is centred on the experience of social connectivity and integration with others. Pai & Chandra (2021) concluded that ego integrity and mental health are both significantly better in the elderly who enjoy substantial interactions with others. However, the development of ego integrity may be affected or despair may be worsened as a result of social exclusion, which includes less social engagements (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020). Barbara's experiences align with Erikson's framework, where, after losing her spouse, she experiences seclusion and disconnection. Disengagement from enjoyable activities highlights her quest for meaning and satisfaction.

Interventions

Older adults are prone to loneliness, a negative emotion caused by a perceived lack of companionship in terms of quantity or quality in their relationships with an attachment figure or the community, due to the interaction of health and environmental factors (O'Rourke et al., 2018). Diverse approaches may be utilised to alleviate the adverse consequences of social exclusion as a whole. Primarily, Simionato et al. (2023) suggested, it is critical to cultivate social connections and encourage active participation in the community. They stress that a lack of social connectivity can result in worse physical and mental health outcomes, chronic disease, depression and early mortality. In support of this, Morgan et al. (2019) concluded that promoting involvement in social groups, gatherings or voluntary activities provides opportunities for meaningful connections and a sense of belonging. For instance, Barbara may benefit from joining local community groups such as reading or gardening clubs, which would allow her to connect with people who share the same interests as her.

Furthermore, Wang et al. (2023) emphasises that promoting older adults to actively seek social support is a crucial strategy for alleviating social exclusion and countering feelings of loneliness and isolation. This process encompasses seeking comfort and companionship from others, exchanging stories, and gaining compassion and insight in return. Through consistent and meaningful interaction with family, friends or support groups, they can gradually develop meaningful connections and find relief in their emotions (Devkota et al., 2023 & Ozbay et al., 2007). Also, it can be seen that, research done by Wu & Sheng (2020) indicates that friendships are essential for older individuals as they provide psychological comfort and facilitate the sharing of knowledge. Equally important, cultivating strong social ties not only improves emotional well-being but also serves as a significant

source of practical support and aid when required (Martino et al., 2017). Hence, highlighting the necessity of seeking social support among the elderly is critical for minimising the harmful consequences of social exclusion, improving general well-being and contentment in later life.

Conclusion

Upon closer examination of the psychological implications of social exclusion on elderly individuals, it becomes apparent that there are profound effects on their cognitive, emotional and social well-being. Cognitive deterioration, which occurs when social connections and stimulation are disrupted, presents a substantial threat to overall cognitive well-being. This underscores the criticality of maintaining intellectual engagement and emotionally significant relationships. From an emotional standpoint, social exclusion frequently results in fundamental emotions of isolation and hopelessness, which are grounded in attachment theory and the James-Lange theory of emotions. These consequences have additional implications for mental well-being and overall life satisfaction. Socially, extended periods of isolation can impede opportunities for social interaction and support by causing disengagement from community activities and networks. It is crucial to prioritise the resolution of social exclusion among the elderly, which requires the cultivation of inclusive environments, the encouragement of social support networks, and the promotion of community engagement in order to alleviate its negative consequences. Hence, acknowledging the significant influence that social exclusion has on an individual's ongoing progress and general well-being highlights the criticality of proactive measures that foster social inclusion and foster a sense of value and connection among older adults, such as Barbara, so that they may flourish in their later years.

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