

ECPS5004: Individual Differences Across the Lifespan

Barbara's Case Study: Cognitive, Emotional and Social Effects of Social Exclusion on Older Adults

Introduction

Barbara, a seventy-six-year-old widow, was once a vibrant as well as outgoing personality who enjoyed dedicated visits to a ballroom dancing club and several trips along with her late husband. Due to her fulfilling career as a teacher, her personality represented the embodiment of community spirit, consequently, leading her to flourish in terms of social connections. Since her husband's passing four years ago, Barbara's affable character dwindled to an isolated and weary spirit due to her husband's bereavement, shrouded in the ghost of what is known as social exclusion.

The concept of social exclusion itself can be described on a number of different scopes, however, the essence of feeling socially isolated refers to a disconnection of the individual from social interactions and institutions (Hossain et al., 2022). According to this research, isolation and exclusion from society can manifest, not only on a social basis but also, in various circles of life such as economic and cultural aspects. Thus, social exclusion refers to the alienation certain categories of society experience including the older-age population. During recent years, studies of the impact of isolation from society on the ageing population has gained extensive attention, especially with research confirming the vulnerability of older adults to social exclusion as mentioned by Van Regenmortel et al. (2016). Several factors influence feelings of alienation from age-related changes, mourning of late family members to global advancements such as digitalisation and alteration in familial situations (Van Regenmortel et al., 2016). Undoubtedly, one of the fundamental survival needs of human beings is their instinct to initiate and retain connections with members of their own community with the purpose of strengthening physical and emotional states of well-being. However, humans suffer greatly

when their demand of social connectedness and participation is compromised and social exclusion acts as an effective impediment to this need (Zhang et al., 2021).

Therefore, social discrimination depicts serious threats on an individual's emotional, cognitive and social development especially during later years. This field of research has been popular amongst those of younger ages and individuals with various mental adversities with minimal focus on older adults (Van Regenmortel et al., 2016) who have encountered a similar experience to Barbara's life story. This essay will delve deep into the numerous challenges imposed by feeling excluded on older adults' psyche and devise ways on how to overcome these challenges to lend a helping hand to adults experiencing isolation as well as minimise the accompanying negative consequences to elevate the levels of life satisfaction in later stages of life.

Cognitive effects

Amongst the potential ramifications of being separated from social interactions and relationships, older adults experience significant diminishing cognitive abilities that range from memory decline to development of depression. It has been identified that loneliness poses a profound risk to an individual's cognitive health by increasing the possibility of cognitive dysfunction and memory loss (Palmer, 2019). In a systematic review conducted in 2016 by Kuiper et al. (2016), a meta-analytical approach of 43 articles was utilised to evaluate social relationships from multiple perspectives and it was found that cognitive regression is linked to weaker social connections (Kuiper et al., 2016). Further elaboration was conducted on this basis through another updated meta-analysis study which incorporated relative studies ranging from 2012 to 2020, all of which confirmed the suggestion that lack of social connections predicted a dysfunction in cognitive abilities (Piolatto et al., 2022). Another research carried

out on English adults of the older population with an age range of 50 years and above aimed to investigate the mutual relationship between isolation and cognitive processes (Yin et al., 2019). After a decade long research, it was found that an increased rate of isolation and loneliness resulted in deteriorating cognitive functioning with considerable setbacks on other abilities such as memory and verbal proficiency. This study highlights the outreach that can be implicated by social exclusion and loneliness across different cognitive aspects. Moreover, a research study investigated social alienation amongst a population of elderly Chinese adults and it was discovered that remote, elderly women endure rising levels of cognitive deficits and social exclusion. Particularly, it was found that social excluded women are 23 times more likely to undergo reduced cognitive abilities in a stark contrast to their male counterparts who are involved in society (Yang et al., 2018), reflecting the same results highlighted in previous research.

Regarding the functioning of memory in the context of social isolation in older adults, a 2023 systematic review investigated 12 articles with populations of middle as well as older aged adults aged 45 and above. It was revealed that poor memory performance was affiliated with loneliness and lack of social connections. Interestingly, these factors had the most detrimental effect on memory (Kang & Oremus, 2023). A separate study collected data from adults who were aged 50 and above over a span of 20 years to investigate the relationship between loneliness duration and memory function (Yu et al., 2022). Through this research, it was found that prolonged period of loneliness was associated with lower episodic memory scores along with an accelerated diminishing of memory processing with a notable prominence in participants who were aged 65 and above. Additionally, an important distinction was the high prevalence of association between loneliness and memory decline in women as compared to men (Yu et al., 2022) which is consistent with the study carried by Yang and colleagues in

Chinese elderly conducted in 2018 (Yang et al., 2018). Furthermore, a research utilised data from 5000 older adults from the United States to examine whether social isolation poses as a significant risk factor for dementia (Huang et al., 2023). Over a period of 9 years, the participants' occurrence of memory loss was tracked and findings revealed that socially isolated adults were increasingly prone to developing dementia with a 28% risk rate. In another interesting finding in the same study by Huang et al. (2023), the risk rate was consistent throughout different racial and ethnic communities, suggesting a link between being socially excluded and a decline in memory functioning. (1214)

Emotional effects

Undoubtedly, cognitive repercussions do not manifest in isolation but are accompanied by implications on the individual's emotional well-being. A possible outcome of being excluded from the surrounding community can act as stimulus for feelings of sadness and depression, especially amongst those of older age. Ample research explored the phenomenon of being uninvolved socially and its relationship with the emergence of depression in the elderly, on of which was a cross-sectional study conducted in India (Hossain et al., 2022). Acquiring data from over 30,000 older adults, it was observed that increased prevalence of symptoms related to depression were linked with rise in social exclusion scores (Hossain et al., 2022), depicting an associating link between depression and loneliness in those of older ages. Identically, research performed on older Chinese individuals living alone replicated similar set of results (Tong et al., 2011) to the one mentioned previously. Outcomes of the study identified that 30% of the elderly individuals experienced moderate or slightly above moderate depression indicators. Supporting literature also includes research carried out in 2009 on 55 older individuals of both genders which disclosed, as expected, a positive correlation between depressive moods and feelings of loneliness (Singh & Misra, 2009).

Loneliness also exacerbates feelings of solitude in older adults, particularly within the context of social alienation. In favour of this claim, data from four Nordic countries collected from adults who were over 60 were collected and analysed to examine the correlation between factors of social exclusion as well as seclusion (Dahlberg et al., 2022). During the analysis, a notable improvement in predicting feelings of loneliness was found when factors of social exclusion were involved in the study and aspects such as possessing few social contacts along with independent living is connected to increased likelihood of loneliness according to Dahlberg et al. (2022). This established connection can explain why Barbara encounters intense feelings of sadness and solitude as she longs for the companionship and support, that she once possessed, resulting in feelings of emptiness and alienation. In addition to that, being excluded from various forms of social activities and relationships might give rise to anxious states of being and a heightened sense of stress. Potentially, symptoms of anxiety and stress have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a period marked by strict physical distancing and intense isolation, with devastating effects on those of older ages. For instance, a longitudinal study was conducted on older adults to investigate influence of lockdowns on levels of isolation, loneliness and unsatisfied health demands. Other than a large portion of participants reporting feelings of seclusion and challenges in accessing assistance with functional needs, over half the adults in the study reported heightened levels of isolation. Meanwhile, rates of depression and anxiety were experiencing a significant rise in these adults (Kotwal et al., 2020). Outside the scope of the pandemic, the results persist in validity as a study conducted in the USA of adults with an age range of 57 to 85 years old were evaluated for a variety of aspects related to social isolation and their contribution to anxiety along with depression indicators (Santini et al., 2020). Santini and colleagues discovered that exclusion from society led to increased perceptions of subjective loneliness. Consequently, this reflected

on symptoms of depression and anxiety through heightening these feelings, with bi-directional influences also playing a role (Santini et al., 2020). In Barbara's case, her reliance and the uncertainty of her son's next call may elevate her anxiety and emotional distress.

Social effects

Experiencing exclusion from society inflicts devastating effects on the elderly, especially on a social level, as it can lead to extreme ramifications such as stigmatization and discrimination. Essentially, this phenomenon is known as ageism and refers to the attitudes of stereotyping, bias and unequal treatment of older adults due to their actual age (Kang & Kim, 2022). As mentioned by Kang and Kim, the stereotypical nature of ageism can influence assumptions about older individuals' abilities whether they are physical, psychological or social and amongst other traits related to age. Another paper written by Marques et al. (2020) mentioned that ageism is extremely prevalent to the point where it is considered now as a critical challenge and a crucial public health matter. Attitudes and presumptions about ageing carry profound pessimistic impacts on individuals of the elderly population across different aspects of their life such as workplace, cognitive abilities and health (Marques et al., 2020). With all the different prejudices and stereotypes playing a role in the further stigmatization of the elderly, it is inevitable that older adults will potentially be excluded from various social activities, healthcare services and opportunities of employment. Unfortunately, all these variables will further promote feelings of isolation and alienation. In the United States, a study of over 2000 adults aged 50 to 80 years old reported that 93.4% of these adults were subjected to a form of ageism in their daily lives (Allen et al., 2022). Not only that, but these findings were reported across varying demographic categories and were linked with harmful outcomes on mental as well as physical health (Allen et al., 2022). Stereotypes of intelligence and poverty were also recognized as factors that contributed to social exclusion in domains such as homes

along with religious facilities in research conducted on older women in southeast Nigeria (Ekoh et al., 2021). All in all, these variables led to feelings of sadness and depression, driven by this societal isolation, affecting rates of life satisfaction in these women (Ekoh et al., 2021).

Scarcity of social networks and connections can also be recognized as a significant social impediment in an older adult's life. Losing meaningful relationships due to retirement, relocation and passing away of family members or friends can trigger feelings of disconnection from their surrounding environment along with a struggle in maintaining fulfilling connections. Not to mention the effect these losses might have on mental and physical well-being. According to (Brodbeck et al., 2017), marital bereavement can be a significant stressor at this age as it represents the absence of emotional and social relationships which causes a deep imbalance in the individual's attachment system. In addition to that, it also requires the individual to come to terms with the loss and generate a new identity as well as outlook on the future (Brodbeck et al., 2017). Applied to Barbara's case, this is true as many of her friends either live far away or are preoccupied followed with the loss of her husband have constituted a lack of basic support and companionship that she once enjoyed.

Another study worth mentioning and particularly intriguing examined how certain elements in older adults' lives influenced their well-being, in the context of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development stages. In this research carried out by (Tahreen & Shahed, 2014), 100 older adults in Lahore were given questionnaires to measure levels of ego integrity, social support and health-related quality of life. Erikson's theory claims that as people bypass from one stage to another, they are confronted with conflicts represented as inner psychological needs and external societal pressures wherein they are required to solve them and successful resolutions promotes the individual to the next stage (Tahreen & Shahed, 2014). The stage

faced by older adults is the ego integrity versus despair whereby the former represents a general feeling of acceptance and satisfaction one's life while the latter encompasses hopelessness and regret over their course of life as written by Tahreen and Shahed (2014). Results reflected a positive association of ego integrity with good social support and better mental as well as physical health (Tahreen and Shahed, 2014). This might indicate that poorer social connections can harbour feelings of unacceptance and regret over one's life at a later stage, worsening emotional states and feelings of loneliness.

Strategies to ameliorate negative effects of social exclusion

In order to tackle the various challenges faced by older adults, a review study helped in identifying various interventions through which feelings of isolation and loneliness can be reduced in the elderly (Gardiner et al., 2018). Such interventions included collaborative enhancement programmes involving activities performed with a group of people, for instance, friendship enrichment programmes. Other interventions were psychotherapy sessions and interventions created to facilitate the formation of new friendships (Gardiner et al., 2018). The most effective programmes were the ones that were flexible to the participants' needs, focused on building relationships and incorporated the elderly in activities that were fulfilling as founded by Gardiner et al. (2018).

Another meta-analysis paper reviewed studies dating from 2011 to 2021 to deduce which interventions yielded favourable results in reducing older age loneliness (Shekelle et al., 2024). Group-based treatments and internet-related trainings were found to significantly diminish feelings of isolation (Shekelle et al., 2024). A separate review examined 32 studies of interventions suggested to assist in feelings of isolation in older people and it was concluded that group activities that involved participation as well as based on theory were the most

effective. Moreover, treatments with social activities and support group programmes were beneficial (Dickens et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Overall, social exclusion and elimination from societal involvement poses serious risks on older adults' well-being across different aspects of their lives, whether it be on a cognitive, emotional or a social basis. Potentially, they can lead to a decline in various cognitive processes along with increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety as well as the devastating feeling of being alone. Furthermore, loss on a personal basis can create a disconnection between the individual and their environment. Throughout Barbara's lifetime, social along with personal relationships added meaning to her life and her constant struggle to overcome that loss signifies the importance of highlighting one of the most prevalent obstacles that the older population faces. It is crucial that society and governmental circles initiate resolutions to address and resolve the phenomenon of social exclusion within this frail age group, to assist elders like Barbara in seeking help and eliminating discriminating factors against older adults.

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