

Narratives of Loneliness

Rising life expectancies and declining social capital in the developed world mean that an increasing number of people are likely to experience some form of loneliness in their lifetimes. *Narratives of Loneliness* tackles some of the most pressing issues related to loneliness, showing that whilst recent policies on social integration, community building and volunteering may go some way to giving an illusion of not being alone, ultimately, they offer a rhetoric of togetherness that may be more seductive than ameliorative, as the condition and experience of loneliness is far more complex than commonly perceived.

Containing thought-provoking contributions from researchers and commentators in several countries, this important work challenges us to rethink some of the burning issues of our day with specific reference to the causes and consequences of loneliness. Topics include the loneliness and mental health of military personnel, loneliness and social media, loneliness and sexuality, urban loneliness and the experiences of transnational movement and adopted children. This book, therefore makes an overdue multidisciplinary contribution to the emerging debate about how best to deal with loneliness in a world that combines greater and faster connectedness on the one hand with more intensely experienced isolation on the other.

Since Émile Durkheim first claimed that the structure of society could have a strong bearing on psychological health in the 1890s, researchers in a range of disciplines have explored the probable impact of social context on mental health and well-being. Interdisciplinary in approach, *Narratives of Loneliness* will therefore be of great interest to academics, postgraduate students and researchers in social sciences, the arts, psychology and psychiatry.

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Narratives of Loneliness

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
JOHN H. HARVEY	
Introduction by the editors	1
OLIVIA SAGAN AND ERIC D. MILLER	
PART I	
Inter and intrapersonal loneliness	9
1 Loneliness: an overview	11
PHILIP S. MORRISON AND REBEKAH SMITH	
2 Loneliness and relatedness: a philosophical and psychotherapeutic account	26
ROGER FRIE	
3 The lonely side of war's aftermath: traumatization and isolation among veterans	35
JACOBY. STEIN AND ZAHAVA SOLOMON	
4 Sensemaking and shared grief in the social media age	48
PETER JOSEPH GLOVICZKI	
5 Cyberloneliness: the curse of the cursor?	56
ERIC D. MILLER	
6 Loneliness in Lithuanian transnational families: 'I am happy if my children are happy'?	66
MARGARITA GEDVILAITĖ-KORDUŠIENĖ	

vi Contents

7	Disconnections: loneliness in the lives of mobile singles	77
	MAUDE GAUTHIER	
8	Narratives of loneliness and mental ill health in a time of neoliberalism	88
	OLIVIA SAGAN	
9	Adoption and loneliness	101
	HELEN E. LEES	
10	Loneliness in education: the agony and the ecstasy	113
	JULIAN STERN	
PART 2		
	Loneliness: place, space and identity	125
11	From lonely cities to prosocial places: how evidence-informed urban design can reduce the experience of loneliness	127
	RHIANNON CORCORAN AND GRAHAM MARSHALL	
12	‘The lonely city’: urban infrastructure and the problem of loneliness	140
	ROB IMRIE	
13	Homelessness and modern urban loneliness	153
	SANDRA COSTA SANTOS	
14	Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions	162
	ALETTE WILLIS	
15	Loneliness as an occupational hazard: academic identities and the neoliberal work ethic	173
	YVONNE HILL	
16	Isolated and suicidal: critically assessing the persistent stereotype of queer youth as isolated and lonely on a pathway to the big city	185
	ROB COVER	

17 The possibilities of loneliness in a changing world: performing place in <i>Withdrawn</i>	198
STUART ANDREWS	
18 The new gay loneliness?: Desire and urban gay male cultures	211
NICHOLAS MANGANAS	
19 Loneliness in cinema: a pharmacological approach	221
ANGIE VOELA	
<i>Concluding remarks by the editors</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	234

Chapter 6

Loneliness in Lithuanian transnational families

‘I am happy if my children are happy’?

Margarita Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė

The tendency to overlook emotions is common in sociological migration studies (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). With a few exceptions (Baldassar, 2008, 2014), they are also omitted from transnational studies on family relationships as a rather ‘non-sociological’ object of research. If we, however, consider that long-term separation might provoke a wide spectrum of emotions, this tendency seems to be paradoxical.

That the migration of adult children in various ways affects those who stay behind has received increasing attention since the 1990s. There is a vast body of literature on the topic of how migration affects intergenerational contacts (e.g. Fong, Cao, & Chan, 2010; Antman, 2013; de Winter, Koelet, & de Valk, 2013) and an increasing body of literature on immigrants’ strong obligations to care for their relatives and provide transnational long-distance care strategies (Spitzer, Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes, & Stewart, 2003; King & Vullnetari, 2009; Baldassar, 2007a; Baldock, 2000). Studies on intergenerational care over borders have also been conducted in the Eastern European context (Piperno, 2015; Krzyżowski & Mucha, 2013; Krzyżowski, 2014; Zechner, 2008; Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2015a). These find a significant flow of support between family members in origin and destination countries. Because of the specific cultural context (such as strong normative filial expectations) and deficiencies in the formal welfare system for the elderly, migrant children may face the necessity of establishing compensatory care strategies. Nevertheless, most often, the compensatory strategies are insufficient and a shortage of care for the children left behind and elderly parents persists in the Eastern European region (Piperno, 2015).

A few qualitative studies that include the emotional dimension in the research of intergenerational relationships across borders suggest that migration is not an obstacle to sustaining close family ties (Baldassar, 2007b, 2008; Goulbourne & Chamberlain, 2001). Some studies have revealed the role of more concrete emotions in the migration process. Boccagni and Baldassar (2014) disclose how feelings of guilt, often combined with a sense of longing, appear to be a central motivation in migrants’ continuing ties to their homeland. In an earlier study, Baldassar (2008) analyses the emotions of longing as integral features of the kin-work and emotional labour needed to maintain transnational family relationships.

Likewise, this chapter aims to reveal the role of emotions in transnational families, while at the same time, analysing the feelings of loneliness in a vulnerable group in society: elderly parents who belong to Lithuanian transnational families and live in elderly care institutions. In this chapter, I draw on a post-doctoral research project that was not designed specifically to analyse emotions, but the qualitative empirical data was richly transfused with emotional content. Since a more common approach is to analyse the effects of migration on the actual migrants, the chapter presents insights into the quality of the lives of those who stay behind, providing data on an under-researched area, that of transnational families from Eastern European societies. The study reveals the ways narratives of loneliness manifest in the life stories of older parents from such families.

Lithuania is a favourable case through which to study transnational families for several reasons. It has been a 'sending country' for several decades. The expansion of the European Union in 2004 and the latest ratification of the Schengen Agreement in 2007 have changed the demographic situation and migratory behaviour. It is estimated that from the restoration of independence in 1990 to 2011, more than one-sixth of the Lithuanian population has emigrated (Sipavičienė, 2013). However, the relative short distance and availability of low-budget flights between Lithuania and destination countries (the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Sweden) provide opportunities for relatively frequent face-to-face contacts between family members. The research findings may be applicable to other Eastern European societies in which the dominant cultural attitudes support a familial role in elderly care, but social policy provides limited means for elderly support. In Lithuania, as in other Baltic states, the version of strong family responsibilities has been inherited from Soviet times, when it was assumed that the needs of older persons should be met by family members, usually by women (Zechner, 2008), and that putting elderly parents into institutional care was considered a shameful act. Even if such attitudes are changing, family values still predominate in regards to filial responsibilities. Based on data from the *Gender and Generations Survey* (in 2006 and 2009), a significant share of the population (more than 70%) agrees that children should provide care for their elderly parents when they are in need. The experts of state services for the elderly emphasise that neither the quality nor the quantity of state services providing care for the elderly are sufficient (Žalimienė, 2007). Until 2006, social care services were mainly provided by budgetary agencies or NGOs that were directly financed from municipal or state budgets, while from 2006, the adoption of new social service legislation embedded the prerequisites for the entrenchment of a market mechanism (Žalimienė & Lazutka, 2009).

Within this context, I raise the question of whether loneliness is a common element of narrative for those who stay behind – namely, elderly parents living in elderly care institutions. The chapter will suggest some ideas about the dynamics of transnational families in an Eastern European context and open theoretical insights on loneliness and old age in that context.

Loneliness and old age

It is well known that loneliness is an essentially subjective experience and that it is an integral part of the experience of being human. Thus when speaking about loneliness from a sociological perspective, it is important to note that both loneliness and its 'sister', social isolation, cannot be considered objective features of everyday life. In this chapter, I draw on Victor, Scambler, and Bond's (2008, p. 38) interpretation of loneliness as "subjective lived experiences that exist in the form of multiple realities constructed and reconstructed by individual older people within the context of their different lives and life histories". In this way, I apply a social constructionist approach in order to reveal how the members of transnational families construct narratives of loneliness. From a constructionist perspective, I would assume that multiple realities of loneliness exist and that these realities are often relative to others and can co-exist: belonging to a transnational family may be interpreted in multiple ways.

According to Victor, Scambler, and Bond (2008, p. 22), loneliness is

the state in which there is a deficit between the individual's actual and desired level of social engagement and is distinct from being alone (time spent alone), living alone (simply a description of the household arrangements) and social isolation (which refers to the level of integration of individuals and groups into the wider social environment).

The quotation suggests that there are distinctions between the closely related and to some extent overlapping terms of loneliness, living alone, and social isolation. The authors argue that social isolation can be considered a more quantitative, empirical measurement of social engagement (contacts and spatial proximity), while loneliness is a subjectively lived experience. In gerontology, the concepts of *loneliness* and *social isolation* have often been used to characterise the social world of older people and as an indicator of their quality of life. Victor, Scambler, and Bond (2008) draw on the distinction provided by Weiss (1973) between emotional loneliness, defined as an 'affective state' produced by the absence of a figure of attachment, and social loneliness, or the absence of an accessible social network or recognised social roles. Moreover, the post-positivist definition of loneliness and definitions proposed by critical gerontology consider that different members of society construct loneliness differently, and such constructions are specific to particular societies (Victor, Scambler, & Bond, 2008; Biggs, Lowenstein, & Hendricks, 2003).

The stereotypical/problematic attitude considers loneliness, as well as the social isolation closely related to old age, as the time of life when social networks become smaller, the changes from spouse to widow/widower occur, and (in some cases) one's status changes from provider to dependent. Moreover, old age is conceptualised as a time of universal and inevitable biological decline that then manifests itself in physical and mental frailty (Victor, 2005; Victor,

Scambler, & Bond, 2008). Thus it is quite easy to see loneliness as largely associated with later life, and the members of transnational families could be seen to be at an even higher risk of experiencing loneliness. Studies on loneliness at a later age confirm that it is actually a subject sensitive to context. For example, the Victor, Scambler, and Bond (2008) study revealed that loneliness and social isolation are experienced by only a minority of older people. The stereotypical approach equating old age with loneliness and social isolation divert our attention from the majority of older people who do not experience the pathological states of loneliness or social isolation and who are not socially excluded.

Some premises from the life course perspective are relevant while linking loneliness and age. According to the founder of the life course theory, Elder (1994), differences in the year of birth, especially in rapidly changing societies, expose individuals to different historical worlds, with their constraints and options. Individual life courses may mirror these different times. Based on the second principle of the life course theory, the personal impact of any change depends on where people are in their lives at the time of the change. Another notion of interdependent lives takes the central role in the theory of the life course. It assumes that human lives are typically embedded in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span. For example, the misfortune of adult children, as well as their personal problems, become intergenerational (Elder, 1994); “each generation is bound to fateful decisions and events in the other’s life course” (Elder, 1984, p. 40). Finally, the theory takes into account human agency. Within the constraints of their world, people make choices among the options that construct their life course (Elder, 1994).

Methodology

This chapter is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with elderly parents who are part of transnational families and who live in elderly care institutions. Eleven interviews were conducted in 2014–2015 as part of a postdoctoral fellowship funded by the Research Council of Lithuania on the consequences of migration on intergenerational relationships. Nine interviews were conducted in 2015–2016 as a personal initiative. The interviews were conducted in Vilnius, Kaunas, and a few smaller towns in Lithuania. Since the interviews were conducted in elderly parents’ rooms, I could observe their natural environment and was involved in their daily conversations. Although initially planned as interviews, the data collection thus moved to include participant observation, thus allowing additional information to be gathered.

Most interviewees were women (17), which is related to a still high difference in life expectancy between Lithuanian women and men. It was more difficult to find men who live in elderly care institutions and have migrant children. Interviewees who were older than 60 years old and had at least one migrant child were selected; they were born between 1922 and 1953. The biographies of their families were shaped by the historical events of the 20th century: some

of the interviewees had experienced the Second World War and some of them had experienced exile in Siberia. Another particularity of the sample is that their socialisation occurred during the interwar period and was shaped by the reality of Soviet times. They have also experienced a fundamental transformation in society after the nation regained its independence and made the transition to a market economy.

The narratives of loneliness in transnational families

Even if in some cases loneliness is not named, it can be implied by expressions such as “grey days are passing by” or “every day is the same” or by the interviewees specifying a lack of contacts. In other cases, it is directly named and, in some cases, accompanied by tears. I could distinguish two groups of sources associated with loneliness: loneliness associated with the migration of children and loneliness associated with other life course events: losing one’s home and experiencing smaller social networks.

Loneliness and the transnational family: ‘I am happy if my children are happy?’

Most interviewees do not directly interlink loneliness with the fact that their children or child lives abroad. The migration of children is perceived as the only possible solution to enhance their welfare – the most logical sequel of a particular life stage. Almost all interviewees reported frequent virtual contacts with migrant children and various kinds of support flows (emotional, instrumental, and, in some cases, financial). Since the interviews were performed in their rooms, the elderly parents had the possibility to show photographs or presents sent by their children. Significant value is attached to presents: it is an important signifier of their children’s love and care. The barriers of distance also take their place in the framework of transnational relationships, however. Face-to-face contacts in most cases happen at least twice a year, but their initiators are the children. Some of the interviewed parents have never visited their migrant children because of financial reasons or health problems.

Despite solid proof (verbal and in the form of presents) of how the family functions across borders, few interviewees directly expressed feelings of loneliness in relation to migration. For example, Elena appreciates the traditional mother–daughter bond:

Yes, I do get lonely, and I can admit that I am a lonely person. If all the family is together, it is such a joy, especially if you have daughters; it so precious. But nothing can be done. If life goes on like this, nothing can be done.

It seems that ‘not having daughters around’ is an additional brick in the wall of loneliness. One of Elena’s daughters lives in Lithuania (180 km away), but

contact with her is limited because of the daughter's poor health. Interestingly enough, when Elena is in need of help, the migrant daughter is the one who provides care (for example, she was the one who helped her mother to move out of her house). This case implies that the distance is important, but not the only criterion influencing the flow of support between children and parents.

Onute's narrative represents another case of a more direct link between the migration of a child and feelings of loneliness. It reveals the painful loss after the migration of her only son and discloses challenges that members of transnational families may face after migration. Onute is blind, and she was dependent on her son: he was taking care of his mother before his decision to move abroad. Her narrative discloses her strong emotions related to her son's migration:

After he left, I was going crazy. I was very lonely and I was crying a lot, but now I have adjusted. But at the beginning, for 3–5 years, I was just going crazy. Now I have accepted the situation. I cry sometimes when I have certain thoughts, but I have adjusted. He calls me and visits me.

- *It was so painful that he left?*

It was difficult that he was not around. I was used to him being in Kaunas. We lived together in one apartment. I was also worried whether everything was OK with him. I still worry about something bad happening to him. Because I love and loved him very much, I raised him and he is a very good son to me. He is the person I have a close relationship with. Only recently have I found a friend [partner] here.'

After her son's decision to migrate, Onute faced the challenge not only to accept the separation but also to accept the challenges related to care and living arrangements. She could not expect to receive any informal support since her network of family and friends is limited. Due to deficiencies in the availability of social care services provided in home, this option was also not considered.

Both cases illustrate how transnational family life may contain elements of discomfort such as longing, feelings of abandonment, and loneliness. Although loneliness and abandonment are rarely openly named, longing in the case of the transnational family is a culturally accepted reaction. One can easily say 'I miss them' and not be blamed for 'not wishing children happiness'. In fact, longing is the dominant emotion in the framework of transnational family relationships; this emotion was named in almost every interview. Baldassar (2008), drawing on Hochschild, considers 'longing' an integral feature of the kin-work and emotional labour needed to maintain transnational family relationships. She distinguishes four key ways these emotions manifest: discursively (through words), physically (through the body), actions (practice), and imagination (ideas). In most cases of my sample, longing manifests in all these ways: through words, physically (tears), imagination (worrying about the children), and action (phone calls, visits). Longing does not necessarily mean loneliness. A few interviewees (Onute, Elena) who have limited social networks made a parallel between those two concepts, however.

Along with longing, interviewees also emphasised positive aspects of the migration of children: the support they receive from their children, frequent virtual contact, and the enhanced financial situation of their children. The position is expressed by the phrase ‘I am happy if my children are happy’. In this way, the ambivalent position of parents is revealed: strong emotions of longing and worry are combined with joy when the children follow their dreams. The emotions at the other end of the scale, disappointment and sadness, manifest if children face difficulties or problems. The concept of interlinked lives suggested by the life course approach serves the best by disclosing the interconnectedness of the lives of the parents and children. Moreover, the concept also demonstrates the necessity of analysing the impact of migration not only on those who migrate but also on those who stay behind.

Loneliness and events in old age: loss of home and restricted social networks

Although loneliness as a subjective experience is most commonly described as resulting from the absence or loss of social interactions and from social isolation, the particular group of elderly people from transnational families living at elderly care institutions have one more unique quality. More than half the interviewed people related loneliness to the loss of their dwelling. This particular generation is one in which owning a flat or house is a natural part of reality. For this generation, losing that dwelling is perceived as a challenge and loss of one’s own space:

It is too hard to adjust to living here. . . . At home you look through the window and everything what you see is your own, your own trees and yard, everything is yours. Here, nothing is mine. . . (crying).

(Jadvyga)

The loneliness and unhappiness in Jadvyga’s case is strongly expressed as a consequence of a social context. She does not relate it to the loss of frequent inter-generational contacts or other factors. The emotional content is blamed on the necessity of living at an elderly care institution:

Only unhappy people live here. I’m unhappy. Could I be happy? There are only unhappy and lonely people here. You couldn’t find even a single elderly person who had a happy life and came here, and everything is fine at home. There is nobody like this.

- *Why are they unhappy?*
- *They aren’t at home. I saw an embroidered towel with the words ‘Goodbye, goodbye, I am going back home’ [religious implication] in one woman’s room. . . . This woman became my friend.’ (Jadvyga)*

The experience of loneliness is unpleasant and distressing, and is spoken of in parallel with unhappiness. Links between loneliness and living in an institution are also found in Birute's case. She relates the regimented activities specific to institutions where there is a great deal of discipline to living in an elderly care institution and contrasts that with the non-structured space at home. She also states that an escape from the regimented routine is provided by religious practices:

You know, the retirement home is the retirement home and your own flat is your own flat. You feel yourself different there [at home]. You have other friends and other surroundings. Here, I don't know; it's like an army or a prison. We have breakfast. Then I attend the relaxation activities. I used to do some sports. Now I am going to do some exercises. I don't like it, but I attend to kill some time. Then dinner. After supper, it's time to sleep. Of course, I have my own life since I am religious and I read a lot. I also pray not only for myself and for my children, but also for all the residents and employees working here.

Religious practices and hobbies provide an escape from regimented routine. Almost half the interviewees emphasised the things they like to do made their adaptation easier. Other interviewees did not, however, demonstrate strong emotions regarding living in an institution. Their narratives are marked by feelings of peace or reconciliation. It is clear from their narratives that they have the ability to accept things the way they are without complaining.

Along with loss of one's dwelling, other life course events were related to loneliness. Due to the specific life course stage, most of the interviewees admit that their horizontal and vertical networks have become smaller.

Loss of a partner and becoming a widow or widower is in many cases referred to as the starting point of loneliness. Drawing on the distinction in Victor, Scambler, and Bond (2008) between emotional and social loneliness, the interview data suggest that social loneliness is a more common reality for elderly parents. Attachment figures preventing emotional loneliness usually belong to intergenerational networks. Most of the interviewees named their relationships with migrant and non-migrant children as very close, and there was only one case when after a divorce a father had distant relationships with his migrant sons.

Conclusions

While studying the under-researched group of those who stay behind, this study tackles loneliness in a wider social context. In other words, the sociological insights allow loneliness in relation to social context to be understood.

Loneliness in many cases does not seem to be a natural part of human existence, but rather just another part in the puzzle of unhappiness shaped by social and economic forces. The elderly parents from transnational families who were

interviewed construct the narratives of loneliness in two ways. In some cases, the direct or latent links between loneliness and being a member of a transnational family are drawn. Thus we can consider loneliness a reaction to the migration of children only to some extent. In this study, longing for family members was revealed to be an integral part of the emotional labour needed to maintain transnational family relationships, as found earlier by Baldassar (2008).

In other cases, loneliness is linked with other life course events: loss of a dwelling and reduced social networks. It is clear that life stories on a micro level are being shaped by a particular historical time in a transitional society: economic fluctuations and volatile geopolitics leading to the separation of family members. In the case of Lithuania, where the economic welfare of the elderly is far from sufficient, the limited agency of those who stay behind should be seen as an issue and become an object in the field of migration and family studies (at least for the group who stay in state care institutions). To return to the theoretical considerations concerning the rather tenuous or non-existent link between old age and loneliness, this study suggests that particular social groups are at risk of experiencing higher levels of loneliness. Thus the study confirms the theoretical statement that loneliness in old age is a context-sensitive phenomenon. Even if the world in the 21st century has become more connected and people can cross boundaries as never before, elderly parents have limited agency to cope with feelings of loneliness.

The finding of a link between loneliness and the loss of one's private dwelling indicates the need for and significance of the development of accessible and beneficial social services provided at home. Previous qualitative studies also confirm that a priority form of care received in older age is the one provided at home (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2015b). It is obvious that the countries sending migrants face not only the challenges of the brain drain but also a care drain. Given that migrants contribute to the economies of destination countries, transnational social protection is and should be an emergent field of study.

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76 Margarita Gedvilaite-Kordusiene

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