

Technology to address social isolation and loneliness in later life? A Sociological Approach

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1. Aim

This paper discusses the role of communication technologies in tackling social isolation and loneliness in later life. Social isolation equals low social support, social participation, and quantity and quality of relationships, whereas loneliness relates to feelings of lacking companionship and belonging. Lonely and socially isolated older adults (aged 65+) are more likely to face health decline and social exclusion. The literature suggests that new communication technologies can create opportunities for social connectedness, helping address social isolation and loneliness. To examine these opportunities, I draw on studies with older adults using the Strong Structuration Theory (SST).

2. Data & Methods

I combined longitudinal deployments of a tablet-based communication app in two Canadian care homes with research conducted in two Australian care homes. The Canadian study gave the app to older adults (n=16) at risk of social isolation and loneliness to use as they saw fit during 2-3 months (2014-2015). Adoption and outcomes of the technology were evaluated through interviews, psychometric scales, usability and accessibility tests, logs, and field observations. The Australian study (2017-2018) explored lived experiences of, and initiatives/responses to, social isolation and loneliness with frail older adults (n=20), through interviews and field observations. Qualitative data were analyzed with thematic analysis; quantitative data with Sign and Friedman tests.

3. Results

The Canadian study shows that the app increased perceived social interaction with relatives and friends for 13 participants. Six reported high perceived social connectedness, i.e., meaningful social interaction. These participants had family living abroad or afar and the app allowed them to deepen those relationships. However, for two participants the app made them more aware of their status when relatives did not reply. These unintended consequences emphasized the need to better understand experiences of social isolation and loneliness in later life. This was accomplished in the Australian study – findings indicate that loneliness and social isolation are linked to loss of family/friends, institutionalization, health, and decline of independence. They are also ambivalent phenomena: on the one hand, related to ‘oldering’ as a structural dimension (status, age-based norms); on the other hand, resting on an agentic dimension, as individual fault or responsibility. Interviewees highlighted that responses/initiatives to tackle social isolation and loneliness must avoid the one-size-fits-all.

4. Conclusion

Results underline the need for a contextualized understanding of experiences and responses to social isolation and loneliness in later life. In particular, they show the interplay of structural and agentic dimensions as brought to light by SST.