DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 346 CG 017 588

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TITLE Loneliness among Elderly Widowers.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (36th, San Francisco, CA, November 17-22, 1983). For an analysis of the widowers' lifestyle and widowers as caregivers see, ED 216 276 and ED 230 849.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Activities; Daily Living Skills; Emotional Problems; Life Satisfaction; Life Style; *Loneliness; *Males; Older Adults; Social Isolation; *Widowed

ABSTRACT

The fact that few researchers have studied loneliness in widowhood may be related to the concept itself which spans intellectual perspectives, incorporating elements of affect, cognition, and social structure. To examine loneliness among elderly widowers, 24 adult males (participants in a more comprehensive study of widowed men, aged 63 to 93 years) were interviewed and completed the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale, and Townsend's Index of Incapactiy. Twelve of the men said they were seldom lonely. An analysis of factors relating to loneliness showed that those who were not lonely were more positive about their life situations, more autonomous, and more independent than those who were lonely. Car ownership, amount of driving, going for walks, and having a hobby were inversely related to loneliness. Those who could manage daily activities without difficulty or aid from another person were less likely to profess loneliness. Loneliness was statistically unrelated to frequency of contact with children, to self-reported feelings of closeness to children, or to being a father at all. Performing services for others and participating in volunteer activities decreased loneliness. Only two of the men reported having male confidants. The findings suggest that elderly widowers can overcome loneliness through activity and motivation. (BL)

LONELINESS AMONG ELDERLY WIDOWERS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Francisco, 1983

INTRODUCTION

The social-psychological concept of loneliness has been traditionally overlooked in the research literature. As recently as ten years ago, Robert Weiss, in an introduction to his book on loneliness, stated that "only a handful of psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists have studied the ordinary loneliness of ordinary people " (1973, p.9) Since that time, the work of Weiss and the earlier work of psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) have been augmented by a substantial body of research on social and emotional aspects of loneliness. A recent book of edited papers on loneliness, the result of a national conference on the subject in 1979, contains a bibliography of more than 300 entries, most of them written after 1975 (Peplau and Perlman, 1982).

This recent interest in the concept of loneliness no doubt has been sparked by the growing numbers of people in different age groups who are living alone. As the divorce rate has risen, so have the numbers of men and women who live alone for varying amounts of time. As more women opt for careers, more have postponed marriage in favor of living alone. Older people, too, live alone in increasing numbers. In the 20 year period from 1950 to 1970, the proportion of elderly people living with relatives fell from more than 20% to 12.5%. Over 60% of people ages 65 to 74 lived alone in 1970 (Kobrin, 1981).

The majority of elderly people living alone are widowed. Yet, in spite of the recent spate of material on loneliness in the professional and popular (e.g. Bernikow, 1982) literature, surprisingly few researchers have focused specifically on loneliness in

widowhood beyond initial work by Lopata, (1973), Townsend, (1968) and Tunstall,(1967). The lack may be attributed to the concept itself, which spans intellectual perspectives, incorporating elements of affect, cognition and social structure.

This paper explores loneliness among elderly widowers, a group traditionally perceived as being especially vulnerable to loneliness. The data was collected as part of a more comprehensive study of 26 men, ages 63 to 93, whose wives had died in one Massachusetts city within a nine month period in 1978. Names were obtained from wives' death certificates and the men were interviewed in depth in their homes an average of two years and nine months after becoming widowed. All the surviving spouses of women who had died at age 60 or over, and whose deaths were recorded at the city hall during four randomly selected months, were located. Sixty percent were interviewed. Four men refused. Others had remarried (6), had died (4), or were ineligible (3) because they had been separated for many years at the time of the wife's death.

Loneliness is a particularly relevant issue in relation to elderly widowers, whose rates of mortality (Gove, 1975), illness (Verbrugge, 1979), and suicide (Gove, 1972; Berardo, 1970) exceed those of their married counterparts. The aggregate statistics point to the conclusion that it may be harder for a man to lose a wife than for a woman to lose a husband.

Virtually everyone who loses a spouse through death experiences a painful period of bereavement (Glick, et al., 1974), often accompanied by obsessive thoughts of the deceased, restlessness, insomnia, somatic complaints, and even hallucinations of the deceased (Jacobs and Douglas, 1980; Gerber, et al., 1975; Parkes, 1972;

Lindemann, 1944). Data on adjustment to widowhood indicate that among women, manifestations of grief gradually subside and that many women, often the more educated, reorganize their lives and develop new roles as a result of widowhood (Lopata, 1975). Perhaps because of the popular misconception that most widowers remarry (Glick, 1979), there is little similar information about the adjustment of widowers beyond the initial period of bereavement. Do elderly widowers continue to experience loneliness three years after bereavement? How does loneliness relate to personal and environmental characteristics? Based on a small non-random sample, results of this exploration are suggestive rather than definitive. Commentary of the respondents was bolstered by statistical measures of association between variables, using tests appropriate for small nonparametric samples (Siegel, 1956).

RESULTS

Of 24 men who responded to the question "How often do you feel lonely?", 12 responded that they were "seldom or never" lonely, two that they were "sometimes" lonely and ten that they were "often" lonely. Not surprisingly, loneliness was closely associated with morale as measured by the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (Lawton, 1975) (r_s* = .6643, $p > .001$). The non-lonely half of the sample were generally more positive about their life situations.

What distinguishes widowers who say they are lonely from those who are not? More than thirty factors were analyzed in relation to loneliness. The picture that emerges is that among this small sample, freedom from loneliness is most closely associated with

* Spearman's Correlation Coefficient

autonomy and independence -- the ability to "get out of the house" and to live one's life as one pleases, free from constraints.

Statistically, there was a significant association between Townsend's Index of Incapacity (1963) and loneliness (r_s = .3865, $p > .05$). Those who could manage daily activities without difficulty or aid from another person were less likely to profess loneliness. In fact, men who lived alone were less likely to say that they were often or sometimes lonely (31%) than those who lived with others (55%). Of the 12 men who did not live alone, most were dependent in varying degrees because of health problems. Although they lived with children (5), siblings (3), unrelated people (2), or peers in nursing homes (2), they were likely to feel lonely when shared residence indicated dependence.

Individual interviews show clearly that contact, per se, does not necessarily assuage loneliness. Seventy-nine year old Mr. D., as a rather extreme example, was patriarch of a large Italian family which included four children, numerous nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters, most of whom lived in the same or neighboring cities, many in the same neighborhood. Obese and completely bedridden, Mr. D. had suffered a stroke soon after his wife's death. His divorced son had moved back to the family home to help to care for his father. At night, if Mr. D. needed help with toileting, he would knock on the ceiling of his room with a cane and his son would come downstairs to aid him. Every day various relatives came in with food and to administer medications on a regular schedule. Still, Mr. D. was extremely lonely, saying that if he hadn't lost his wife, "things would be different." His "best friend" was his dog who "keeps me company", and whose picture hung on the wall.

Similarly, 89 year old Mr. Q. had a cheerful and immaculate room complete with easy chair and TV in the home of his married daughter. His granddaughter and her family lived downstairs, and he saw his great-grandchildren every day when they came upstairs for breakfast. Nevertheless, Mr. Q. complained several times that he had "nobody to talk to." His other daughters are "busy -- too busy to see their father," and he is too frail to leave the house by himself.

As these respondents illustrate, loneliness was statistically unrelated to frequency of contact with children, self-reported feelings of closeness to children, or, indeed, to being a father at all. Other studies have consistently shown a similar pattern in regard to morale (Glenn and McLanahan, 1981; Lee, 1979; Wood and Robertson, 1978; Blau, 1973; Adams, D., 1971; Adams, B., 1968). The most likely, and currently prevalent, explanation is that relationships with children do not enhance self-esteem. They are non-voluntaristic and are often skewed toward the child along the dimensions of power and control (Dowd, 1980). Interestingly, although men who talked about children in a warm, positive manner were evenly divided between lonely and non-lonely, all of the men who talked about their children negatively and who stressed family problems were often lonely (χ^2 = .042, V = .46395). Perhaps personality plays an important role in loneliness or perhaps children are irrelevant to loneliness except when relationships exert a negative effect.

Relationships with peers, on the other hand, are seen as enhancing self-esteem and hence life satisfaction since they are inherently equal and voluntaristic (Arling, 1976). In fact, although frequency of seeing friends was not significantly related to loneli-

ness in this sample, there was a slight statistical association (r_s = .2969, $p > .08$). There were closer statistical relationships between participation in meetings of voluntary organizations (χ^2 = .033, V = .5332) and going out to a restaurant with friends or relatives (r_s = .6107, $p > .01$). Performing services for others was also related to loneliness. Only 20% of those who offered rides, took others shopping, etc. were often lonely versus 57% of those who did not perform services for others. Once again, these associations suggest the value of mobility and independence as a curb against loneliness.

But perhaps the crucial aspect in regard to loneliness is the emotion attached to relationships rather than mobility or activity. Certainly, having someone with whom to talk, with whom to share feelings and problems would seem to be important in curbing loneliness. Indeed, the influential studies of Lowenthal and associates (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Lowenthal, 1968) have shown the value of a confidant in weathering life crises and supporting mental health. However, among this group the association between loneliness and having a confidant was not clear-cut. Of the 12 men who said they were seldom or never lonely, five had a confidant and seven did not. Of the 12 lonely men, half had a confidant and half did not. Typically, the men friends with whom the widowers shared activities such as playing cards or eating out (and half of the sample had such friends) were not confidants. In fact, only two men named male peers as confidants. This finding is consistent with those of other observers who have found women's friendships to be more intimate and affectively richer than those of men, who have been socialized to instrumental rather than expressive roles (Hess, 1979; Balswick, 1979; Powers and Bultena, 1976; Booth, 1972).

Mr. G. and Mr. K., neighbors whom I interviewed, are illustrative examples. They had become widowers at about the same time, and both were currently quite depressed, giving similar accounts of broken relationships with women friends. Although they lived near each other, had known one another for years and occasionally shared a meal which Mr. G. enjoyed preparing, neither claimed that they had discussed their feelings concerning their similar situations or had gained any support from the other. It seems unlikely that women in a similar situation would not have shared their experiences! In fact, twice as many men claimed that they had women confidants rather than men confidants -- daughters (2), a sister (1), a niece (1), women friends (5).

If one type of relationship can be said to buffer loneliness, it appears to be a heterosexual "dating" relationship. Of the five men seeing women regularly, four claimed that they were never lonely. They did not stress the emotional aspects of the relationships, however, but the social aspects. Seventy-seven year old Mr. H., for example, had been dating an old friend for a year-and-a-half. Neither wanted to remarry ("I had one damn good marriage, so did she. That's enough."), but he was thoroughly enjoying the relationship. "We have a ball together. You know, going places and doing things. She's got her house, I got mine. Things are fine." Men who had dating relationships (as opposed to others who had women friends whom they helped with errands or odd jobs, or the one debilitated man who had a housekeeper) were, for the most part, mobile, active and involved in an extensive peer network as well. Mr. B., also, had a satisfying relationship with a woman he had met at the local senior citizens club. He was ambivalent about marriage because of their

different economic situations, but they went dancing every week and had lunch together at the neighborhood meal site several times a week.

Widowers like Mr. H. and Mr. B. can serve as prototypes for intact, independent elders who are able to overcome loneliness. The past marriage appears not to be associated with this ability. The correlation between degree of loneliness and idealization of the past marriage was non-significant, just as the association between the suddenness of the death of the spouse and loneliness was non-significant. Rather, as stated initially, loneliness appears related to independence and autonomy. Car ownership and amount of driving were statistically associated with loneliness ($r_s = .5825$, $p > .01$) as were going out for walks ($r_s = .4218$, $p > .05$), and having an interest in a hobby ($r_s = .3424$, $p > .05$). The three men who had part-time employment claimed that they were seldom or never lonely.

CONCLUSION

When asked what advice the widowers would give to other men in the same boat, the most common response was, "Keep busy." According to this analysis, popular wisdom has validity. Those who had the motivation and resources to keep busy were, indeed, less lonely three years after bereavement. These elderly widowers must have suffered bouts of loneliness occasionally (Barrett and Schneweis, 1980; Goin et al., 1979); certainly, the circumstances of the wife's death were vivid in their memories, as judged by the often detailed accounts I heard. Nevertheless, most seemed determined to make the best of their situations. Mr. A., for example, was planning a car trip to Florida although he suffered from a painful back condition which would

necessitate his getting out of the car frequently. A self-professed loner by nature, Mr. A. had few friends but was not lonely. "As long as I can get in my car and get around, I'm happy. In the nice weather I go down to the beach (the shore road) and sit on a bench and read." The importance of the motivation to keep going, to do one's best, is illustrated in a negative way by Mr. J. Although he had personal resources of health and mobility, Mr. J. was mired in loneliness and depression. A childless Polish immigrant, he had no relatives and was the only man in the sample who claimed to have no friends. Although he had formerly enjoyed woodworking in his basement and had made several elaborate models of houses and churches which he showed me, he no longer had any interest and did not even read the newspaper any longer.

> "I go through the motions of doing a few things around the house, I make myself something to eat, but by the time it's ready I'm not hungry. . .I wake up in the morning, I see the light, and I don't want to get up. I have no reason to get up. . .I just sit in that chair over there and all these things go through my mind. I have only memories."

The findings reported in this paper suggest that the condition of loneliness need not be a permanent part of widowhood. Half of the men in this small sample claimed that they no longer felt lonely, or did so only occasionally. Their own accounts, augmented by simple statistical analysis, lead to the conclusion that meaningful activity can lessen loneliness. Being without a spouse does not mean that one must be lonely. It can be argued that men center their emotional lives around wives more than wives do around husbands. Women, having specialized in expressive roles, generally have closer relationships with friends and children in widowhood than do men (Longino and Lipman, 1979; Barrett, 1978; Bernard, 1972; Gove, 1972a).

This study suggests that although they may not replace the affective relationships they shared with wives, elderly widowers can overcome loneliness if they have the personal resources to remain independent and the motivation to make life worth living.

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