



SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF WORKING WITH LONELY OLDER ADULTS

Erigitova Lobar Abduqadirovna
Central Asian Medical University, PhD,
Associate Professor, Head of Department
E-mail: lobarxoneryigitova @ gmail.com
ORCID: Login: 0000 – 1110-2136 lobar eryigitova 2136

ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>The phenomenon of loneliness among older adults has become one of the most urgent socio-gerontological issues in modern society. Population ageing, the transformation of family relations, migration, urbanization, retirement, health limitations, and digital inequality have significantly changed the social position of elderly people. Loneliness in old age is not only an emotional or psychological condition but also a complex social phenomenon connected with weakening social ties, loss of social roles, limited participation in community life, and insufficient institutional support. This article analyzes the sociological aspects of working with lonely older adults from the perspective of social integration, social capital, intergenerational solidarity, community-based care, and social policy. The study emphasizes that effective work with lonely elderly people requires a systematic approach involving family, community, healthcare institutions, social services, non-governmental organizations, and state policy. The article argues that loneliness among older adults should be understood as a form of social vulnerability and potential social exclusion, and therefore it must be addressed through preventive, inclusive, and humanistic mechanisms of social support.</p>	<p>Older adults, loneliness, social isolation, sociology of ageing, socio-gerontology, social work, social support, social exclusion, intergenerational solidarity, elderly care.</p>

Introduction

Population ageing is one of the most significant demographic transformations of the twenty-first century. According to the World Health Organization, by 2030 one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or older, and by 2050 the number of people aged 60 years and over is expected to reach 2.1 billion. The number of people aged 80 years or older is also projected to triple between 2020 and 2050, reaching 426 million. These demographic changes make the social protection, health, dignity, and social participation of older adults increasingly important for every society. In this context, loneliness among older adults has become a serious social and public health problem. The World Health Organization recognizes social isolation and loneliness as a priority public health and policy issue, including within the framework of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030.

Loneliness is especially relevant in old age because this period of life is often accompanied by retirement, widowhood, declining physical capacity, chronic illness, loss of friends, reduced income, and decreasing participation in social networks.

However, loneliness should not be understood only as the absence of people around an individual. From a sociological point of view, loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon that reflects the quality of social relations, the level of social integration, access to institutions, and the degree of recognition of older adults in society. A person may live with family members and still feel lonely if emotional warmth, respect, meaningful communication, and social usefulness are absent. Conversely, an older adult living alone may not feel lonely if they remain socially active, respected, and connected with community life.

The relevance of this study is determined by the increasing need to develop sociologically grounded mechanisms for working with lonely older adults. In many societies, including those with strong family traditions, the problem of loneliness among the elderly is becoming more visible due to migration, urban employment, generational distance, individualization of lifestyles, and digital transformation. Therefore, working with lonely older adults requires not only charity or medical care, but also a scientifically based social approach.

The aim of this article is to analyze the sociological aspects of working with lonely older adults and to identify effective mechanisms for reducing loneliness and strengthening social integration.

The main objectives of the article are:

1. to explain loneliness among older adults as a sociological phenomenon;
2. to identify the main social causes of loneliness in old age;
3. to analyze theoretical approaches to loneliness and ageing;
4. to examine institutional, community, and family-based mechanisms of support;
5. to develop practical recommendations for improving work with lonely older adults.

Literature Review

The problem of loneliness among older adults has been studied in sociology, social work, psychology, public health, and gerontology. In sociological theory, the phenomenon of loneliness can be connected with the concepts of social integration, social roles, social capital, anomie, marginalization, and social exclusion.

Émile Durkheim's theory of social integration is important for understanding loneliness because it shows that weakening social ties may increase vulnerability and reduce a person's sense of belonging. In old age, the weakening of family, professional, and community relations may create a condition in which an individual loses stable forms of social attachment.

Talcott Parsons' structural-functional approach helps to analyze old age as a stage of changing social roles. Retirement, the loss of professional status, and the reduction of family authority may lead to role deprivation. If society does not create alternative roles for older adults, they may experience social uselessness and isolation.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital is also highly relevant. Social capital includes networks, relationships, trust, and symbolic recognition. Loneliness among older adults can be interpreted as a decline of social capital, when elderly people lose access to communication networks, decision-making spaces, and socially meaningful activities.

Modern socio-gerontology emphasizes that ageing is not only a biological process but also a social status shaped by family relations, cultural expectations, economic resources, institutional systems, and public policy. In this regard, loneliness is not simply an individual problem but a consequence of social organization.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine reported in 2020 that social isolation and loneliness among older adults are serious but often underestimated public health risks. The report also notes that healthcare systems have important opportunities to identify and respond to loneliness and social isolation among older people. This position is important because it shows that loneliness should be addressed not only by families but also by social and medical institutions.

The World Health Organization also emphasizes that social isolation and loneliness have serious effects on physical health, mental health, quality of life, and longevity. According to WHO materials, around 16% of people globally experience loneliness, while among older people this figure is estimated at around 11.8%. These data confirm that loneliness is a global social problem requiring systematic and interdisciplinary attention.

Research Methodology

This article is based on qualitative sociological analysis. The methodological foundation includes theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, secondary data interpretation, and socio-gerontological conceptualization.

The study uses the following methods:

Theoretical analysis was used to examine sociological concepts related to ageing, loneliness, social isolation, social capital, social roles, and social integration.

Comparative analysis was applied to compare different explanatory approaches to loneliness: psychological, sociological, institutional, and community-based perspectives.

Secondary data analysis was used to interpret information from international organizations, especially the World Health Organization and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Socio-gerontological interpretation was used to analyze loneliness as a social condition connected with old age, social status, family structure, health, and public policy.

The study does not include primary empirical survey data. Its scientific value lies in developing a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding the sociological aspects of working with lonely older adults.

Results. 1. Loneliness as a Sociological Phenomenon.

Loneliness among older adults is a complex social phenomenon. It includes emotional, communicative, institutional, cultural, and structural dimensions. Emotional loneliness appears when a person lacks close, warm, and trusting relationships. Social loneliness appears when an individual has limited participation in wider social networks such as community, workplace, neighborhood, religious groups, or cultural activities. In old age, loneliness is often caused by the weakening of several important social connections. First, the professional network declines after retirement. Second, family

communication may become less frequent due to migration, employment, or generational distance. Third, friendship networks may shrink because of illness or death of peers. Fourth, physical limitations may reduce the ability to participate in public life.

Sociologically, loneliness is connected with social exclusion. An older adult may be excluded from economic participation, cultural events, digital communication, educational opportunities, and public decision-making. This exclusion may gradually reduce self-esteem and create a feeling that the person is no longer needed by society. Therefore, loneliness should not be treated only as an individual emotional state. It must be studied as a social condition that reflects the quality of family relations, community solidarity, social policy, and institutional responsibility.

2. Main Social Causes of Loneliness among Older Adults

The first major cause is the transformation of family structure. In traditional societies, older adults often lived in extended families and had a respected position as keepers of moral values, cultural memory, and life experience. However, modernization, urbanization, and labor migration have weakened traditional forms of intergenerational co-residence. As a result, many older adults live alone or have limited daily contact with children and grandchildren.

The second cause is retirement and the loss of social role. Work provides income, communication, discipline, recognition, and identity. After retirement, many older adults lose not only employment but also a stable social environment. If society does not offer alternative forms of participation, retirement may become a factor of isolation.

The third cause is widowhood and the loss of close emotional support. The death of a spouse is one of the most powerful factors of loneliness in old age. It changes daily routines, emotional security, household organization, and social identity.

The fourth cause is health limitation. Chronic illness, disability, hearing problems, visual impairment, and reduced mobility may prevent older adults from attending social events, visiting relatives, or participating in community activities. If public infrastructure is not age-friendly, physical limitation becomes social limitation.

The fifth cause is digital inequality. Modern communication, public services, medical appointments, banking, education, and family interaction increasingly depend on digital technologies. Older adults who do not have digital skills may become excluded from important forms of communication and services. The sixth cause is poverty. Low-income limits access to transportation, cultural life, healthcare, communication devices, and social activities. Economic vulnerability may deepen dependence and reduce the dignity of older people.

3. Sociological Principles of Working with Lonely Older Adults

Work with lonely older adults must be based on several sociological principles.

The first principle is social inclusion. Older adults should not be treated only as passive recipients of assistance. They should be recognized as active members of society with knowledge, experience, values, and social potential. The second principle is individualization of support. Loneliness has different causes in different people. Some older adults need emotional communication, others need medical support, legal advice, digital education, transportation, financial assistance, or community involvement.

The third principle is intergenerational solidarity. Communication between young people and older adults is important for reducing loneliness and preserving cultural continuity. Intergenerational programs can connect students, volunteers, families, and elderly people through education, storytelling, cultural projects, and mentoring.

The fourth principle is community-based support. Local communities, neighborhood organizations, religious institutions, NGOs, and volunteer groups can play a central role in identifying lonely older adults and involving them in social life. The fifth principle is institutional cooperation. Social services, healthcare institutions, local authorities, educational organizations, and civil society must cooperate. Loneliness cannot be solved by one institution alone. The sixth principle is respect for dignity and autonomy. Support should not create dependence or humiliation. Older adults must be involved in decisions about their own lives.

Discussion

The analysis shows that working with lonely older adults requires a transition from a narrow assistance model to a broad social integration model. Traditional approaches often focus only on material help, food delivery, or medical care. Although these forms of assistance are necessary, they are not sufficient. Loneliness is primarily connected with the loss of meaningful social relations; therefore, the main goal should be to restore communication, participation, usefulness, and belonging.

One effective direction is the development of community centers for older adults. Such centers may provide cultural events, health education, psychological support, legal consultation, hobby groups, physical activity, and digital literacy courses. Their main function should be not only service delivery but also social activation.

Another important mechanism is social prescribing. This approach allows healthcare workers to refer lonely older adults to non-medical forms of support, such as community groups, volunteer programs, cultural activities, and peer communication. Since many older adults regularly visit healthcare institutions, doctors and nurses can help identify social isolation at an early stage.

Digital inclusion is also essential. Teaching older adults to use smartphones, video calls, messengers, online medical services, and public service platforms can reduce isolation. However, digital communication should not replace face-to-face interaction. It should be used as an additional bridge to family, community, and institutions.

Family support remains one of the most important resources. However, modern family life is changing. Children may live far away, work long hours, or migrate abroad. Therefore, society should not place all responsibility only on the family. A balanced model is needed, in which family care is supported by community and institutional mechanisms.

In countries with strong family and neighborhood traditions, including Uzbekistan, the mahalla or local community system can be an important mechanism for working with lonely older adults. Local communities can identify elderly people living alone, organize visits, involve volunteers, provide social monitoring, and strengthen intergenerational relations. At the same time, these activities must be professionalized through cooperation with social workers, psychologists, doctors, and local authorities. The problem of loneliness also has a moral dimension. A society's attitude toward older people reflects its level of humanism, solidarity, and social maturity. If older adults are treated only as dependent individuals, their social potential remains unused. If they are treated as carriers of experience, memory, and wisdom, they can continue to contribute to society.

Conclusion

Loneliness among older adults is a multidimensional social phenomenon that includes emotional, structural, institutional, cultural, and economic aspects. It is closely connected with population ageing, transformation of family relations, retirement, health limitations, poverty, migration, urbanization, and digital inequality.

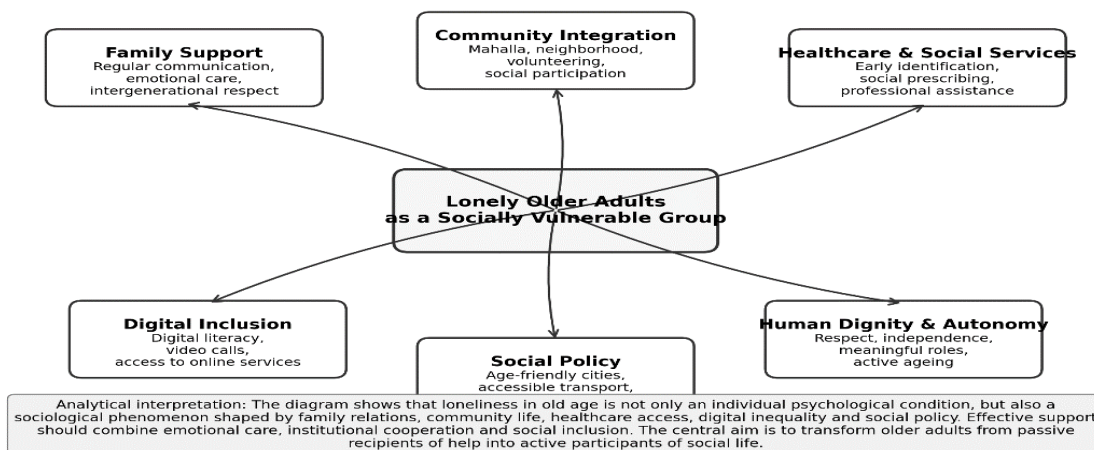
The article has shown that loneliness should not be understood only as a psychological problem. It is also a sociological problem because it reflects the weakening of social ties, decline of social capital, loss of social roles, and insufficient institutional support. Therefore, working with lonely older adults requires a systematic socio-gerontological approach.

Effective work with lonely older adults must include social inclusion, individual support, community-based care, intergenerational solidarity, digital literacy, healthcare-social service cooperation, and protection of dignity. The elderly person should not be viewed only as an object of care, but as an active subject of social life. The following recommendations can be proposed:

1. Local community organizations should create permanent monitoring systems for identifying lonely older adults.
2. Social workers should use individual assessment tools to determine the causes and level of loneliness.
3. Healthcare institutions should include loneliness screening in primary care for older adults.
4. Community centers for elderly people should be expanded and connected with cultural, educational, and health services.
5. Intergenerational projects should be introduced in schools, universities, and local communities.
6. Digital literacy programs should be organized for older adults.
7. Social policy should strengthen age-friendly infrastructure, accessible transportation, and community participation.
8. Family members should be encouraged to maintain regular emotional, practical, and communicative support for elderly relatives.

In conclusion, working with lonely older adults is not only a social service activity but also a sociological, ethical, cultural, and humanistic responsibility. Reducing loneliness in old age means strengthening social solidarity, protecting human dignity, and building an inclusive society for all generations.

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