

Background:

Field: Within the field of old age and palliative care, attention is beginning to be paid to a deeper sense of suffering than that which derives from emotional and social isolation (van Tilburg, 2021). I am referring to **Existential Loneliness** (EL), a phenomenon that also seems to be connected to old age and therefore deserves further academic attention.

Broad definition: EL is rooted in the realization that every human's experience of life is unique and that others will never fully understand one's self, because we are separate beings (Yalom, 1980). In the current literature there is still no consensus about the definition.

The importance of the context of care

- The idea that **context affects the experience of EL is vital in the research on care for older adults** (Sundström et al., 2019).
- The relation between the older adults' subjective experience and care context has been particularly highlighted in the literature about dementia through **the notion of personhood** (Kitwood and Bredin, 1992).
- **Personhood:** a status defined in a given social and cultural context that is attributed to a particular individual on the basis of his/her capabilities (Higgs and Gilleard, 2016).



Contributions

- I pioneer the incorporation of the care context as a crucial factor in the development of EL in older adults.
- By using a theoretical framework of personhood, I highlight the social dimension of care regimes.
- I move beyond the exclusively intra-psychic approach of the phenomenon of EL by crossing boundaries between psychology, nursing, sociology and medical anthropology.



Mixed-method convergent parallel design



Quantitative Strand

Participants.

Belgian older adults (> 65 years old) receiving care on a structural basis at home, enrolled on a waiting list to make the transition to day care, and will potentially move to a NH.

Hypotheses.

EL will **increase** when older adults move along the care continuum.



This increase will be **mediated** by changes in the older adults' personhood status.



Method.

Longitudinal Quantitative Study.

Four assessment waves with a 6-month time interval.

Home Care

Daily Care

Nursing Home

Qualitative Strand

Participants.

Participants with **the highest scores in EL** assessed in the first wave (highest 10% of the sample) are asked to participate.

Questions.

- How does the transition through different care contexts affect how EL is **described and experienced** by older adults themselves?
- How does the older adults' interaction with the care setting (in terms of space and human relationships: with care professionals, with other residents) provoke changes in his/her personhood status?

Method.

Person-Centred Ethnography

- **Guided Interviews**
- **Participant observation**



References cited:

Higgs, P., & Gilleard, C. (2016). Personhood, identity and care in advanced old age. Policy Press.

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van Tilburg, T. G. (2021). Social, emotional, and existential loneliness: a test of the multidimensional concept. *The Gerontologist*, 61(7), e335-e344. DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnaa082

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