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Kieran Walsh
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Anna Wanka *Editors*

Social Exclusion in Later Life

Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives

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Social Exclusion in Later Life

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Chapter 6

Introduction: Framing Exclusion from Social Relations



Vanessa Burholt and Marja Aartsen

6.1 Introduction

In this section we focus on the domain of exclusion from social relations where social relations can be defined as comprising social resources, social connections and social networks. Other types of social engagement with formal civic, political and voluntary groups and organisations are not included in this section, but instead are incorporated in the domain of civic exclusion [see section VI]. Theorising on exclusion from social relations is facilitated by the ROSEnet Cost Action, which brought together experts in the field and led to the publication of a critical review and development of a conceptual model of exclusion from social relations for older people (Burholt et al. 2019). The model captured the complexity of exclusion from social relations through a subjective interpretation of the literature and took into account the interrelationships between systems in the critical human ecology framework (Fig. 6.1). The synthesis of the findings was endorsed by the working group on social relations comprising 45 members from 25 countries. The purpose of this introduction is to outline what exclusion from social relations involves, and to frame the three contributions within this section of the book in the broader research debates and scholarship on this topic.

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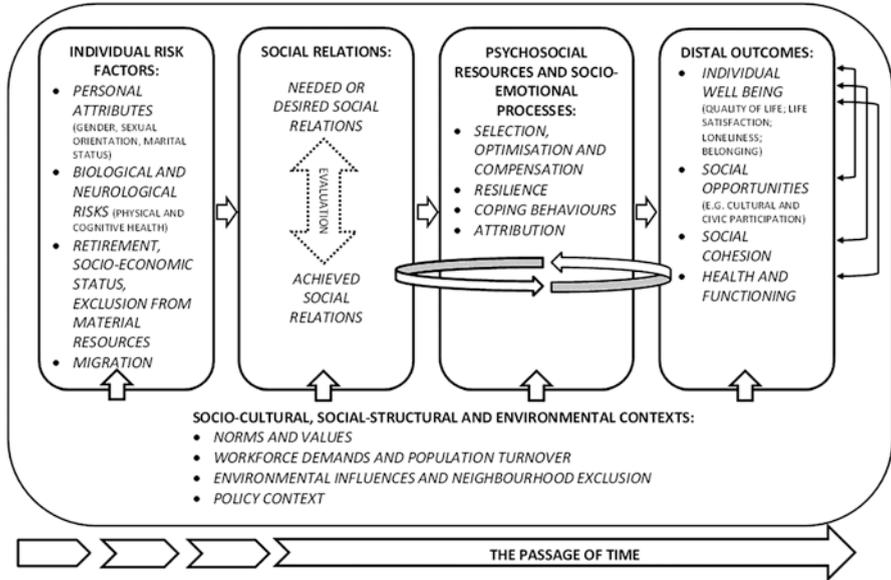


Fig. 6.1 Conceptual model of exclusion from social relations for older people

Source: Burholt et al. 2019

6.2 Exclusion from Social Relations

Social relations are key determinants of an individual’s health, well-being and feelings of belonging, as they provide social and material resources and the value of attachment in its own right (Bowlby 1982). Hence, being excluded from social relations disrupts people from a fundamental aspect of human life and reduces possibilities of being healthy and happy in old-age. While empirical evidence for the beneficial effects of social networks is substantial, it is important to acknowledge also potential negative effects of social relations. Conflictual and/or abusive relations can be extremely stressful and may lead to negative health and well-being outcomes. Abusive relationships may be particularly difficult for older adults to terminate because of the increased risk of declining health and the need for support (Rook 2003).

It is important to define what we mean by exclusion from social relations, as the way it is defined determines our core understanding of it. Based on discussions in the ROSEnet Cost Action, we define exclusion from social relations as a situation in which people are disconnected from adequate levels and quality of intimate relationships, social networks, social support, and/or social opportunities to participate in the wider society. Although exclusion from social relations is often equated with loneliness, we consider it to be a different concept. Loneliness is defined as a negative feeling, which arises when the number and quality of social relations one has is smaller than one would like to have (Perlman and Peplau 1981). Loneliness is thus

seen as just one of the possible outcomes of exclusion from social relations, but one that is highlighted by authors in this section of the book.

The conceptual model of exclusion from social relations articulates separately different elements of this form of exclusion. It describes risks for exclusion from social relationships as personal attributes such as age, gender, education, income, and socio-economic and marital status (De Jong Gierveld et al. 2009) and sexual orientation (Cronin and King 2010); biological and neurological characteristics (Aartsen et al. 2004; Lechner et al. 2007); and life experiences concerning, retirement, exclusion from material resources, and migration (Walters and Bartlett 2009). It makes a distinction between objective ratings and subjective assessments of social relations and how mismatches between these two elements lead to poor outcomes in terms of individual well-being (*e.g.* quality of life, life satisfaction, loneliness and belonging); health and functioning; social opportunities and social cohesion. The conceptual model takes into account the contexts that impact on the process of exclusion. This includes the role of psychological resources (Schoenmakers et al. 2015) and socio-emotional processes (Lang 2000). It also includes the immediate environment such as the walkability and level of safety of a neighbourhood [also see Drilling et al. this volume] and the quality and design of the house (Burholt et al. 2016) and policy contextual influences such as norms and attitudes towards older people, mandatory retirement age and pension systems (Palmore 2015; Gibney et al. 2017; and Ogg and Myck, this volume). Finally, the model illustrates a dynamic relationship between its constituent elements and how each element may change over time.

A helpful, but underutilised (Van Regenmortel et al. 2016) approach to further understand levels of exclusion from social relations is the life-course perspective (Elder 1994). This perspective implies that the degree of exclusion from social relations experienced in older-age is being shaped by conditions and decisions earlier in life. For example, the decision to study, to marry, to raise a family, and to divorce may not only have an immediate effect on the number of social relations people have, but it may have repercussions for the social network people have in later life. Moreover, developments in a person's life are interconnected with developments in other people's lives; for example, caring for a partner limits possibilities to participate in society. Life-course transitions are of particular importance, where for instance losing a spouse or retirement can disrupt a person's social relations. There may also be an accumulation of advantages and disadvantages that may result in inequities in later life for certain groups of older people *e.g.* ethnic minorities, migrants, LGBTQ+ groups, or women.

The life-course perspective further acknowledges that factors leading to exclusion from social relations may vary by time and place, norms, values, and policies, and hence, across societies. As individual lives change over time, so too do 'national cultures' and places, with these dynamics sometimes also contributing to exclusion from social relations. Structural changes such as improved communication or the mass media can influence changes in norms, beliefs, values, customs and traditions (Winter 2017) which in turn can influence older people's expectations concerning the ideal level of social relations. Industrial regional developments that influence

local employment opportunities may directly affect population mobility or population turnover resulting in fewer proximal kin, or reduced neighbourliness (Skinner et al. 2014; Burholt and Sardani 2017) thus contributing to exclusion from social relations.

6.3 Outline of This Section

The three chapters in this section of the book provide an important contribution to the study of exclusion from social relations. They address gaps in evidence that contribute to the eco-bio-psychosocial understanding of differences in experiences of exclusion from social relations for older people. Each chapter in this section, has taken a different approach elucidating how biological manifestation of the body, psychological traits and the socio-cultural, social-structural, policy and physical environment fundamentally impact on the human experience of exclusion from social relations. The outcomes of the interaction are a result of adaption and negotiation that take place within particular cultural contexts. The multi-country approach, also taken in these chapters, is important, as the findings from the studies have greater credibility when they are found to apply beyond the confines of a single nation, and lead to an improved understanding of exclusion from social relations.

The first chapter in this section (Chap. 7 – Van Regenmortel et al.) explores cross-national similarities and differences in the experiences of exclusion from social relations between older people living in rural Britain and Belgium. The chapter expounds on the connections between exclusion from social relations and other domains of exclusion (*e.g.* economic exclusion and exclusion from services). The authors demonstrate the complexity of the interrelationships between the domains by developing and quantifying profiles of exclusion that are used to classify older people. The characteristics of the profiles demonstrate that older people may simultaneously experience exclusion in some domains but not in others.

Morgan et al., in Chap. 8, consider one of the outcomes of exclusion from social relations – loneliness. This chapter seeks to advance understanding of micro- and macro-level drivers of loneliness, and changes in loneliness over time in 11 European countries. The analyses confirms earlier results on micro-level drivers of loneliness, and provide innovative evidence for the influence of macro-level drivers of loneliness, such as perceived safety in the neighbourhood, normative levels of social connectedness and the average level of religiosity of people aged 55 years and over living in the country. Even more important than the level of micro-level factors are the changes therein. A two-year change in macro-level drivers did not lead to statistically significant changes in loneliness in a two-year period.

Waldegrave et al., Chap. 9, emphasise the importance of relationship conflict and quality, and the impact on outcomes in four countries (Norway, Israel, Italy and Finland). In this respect, non-supportive, harmful or abusive relationships contribute to exclusion from social relations and poor outcomes as they deviate from good and extensive social relations. In this chapter, each country level analysis adds

another piece to the jigsaw concerning the holistic assessment of exclusion from social relations. Chapter 9 also addresses the impact of social values and discrimination on exclusion from social relations, with discriminatory attitudes serving to exclude groups or individual older people from opportunities to develop or maintain social relations.

Shortly after the chapters in this section were written, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and many governments introduced physical distancing to slow the spread of the virus. Consequently, older people were frequently excluded from face-to-face contact and public discourse on the age-dependent value of life increased. The extent to which other forms of social contact (e.g. phone, video-calls), or shared experiential knowledge mitigated negative outcomes will be established by concurrent research. However, the academic community has a longer-term role to play in opposing ageist narratives and the ‘legitimisation of ageism’ in order to mollify discrimination and exclusion from social relations.

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