Loneliness among older people in the Swedish media

**Constructions, discourses and the
designation of responsibility**

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Axel Ågren

Abstract

Feelings of belonging or not belonging to other people are commonly seen as an essential and universal part of human existence. How loneliness is talked about and understood is, however, found to differ depending on historical, cultural and societal contexts. Today, there are intense discussions on loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press. Constructions within mass media and - in this licentiate thesis - news-press are found to have a significant influence on how older people evaluate their own life and how older people are treated by the surrounding society. Research with this focus is, however, scarce despite the large amount of studies on loneliness and despite research on constructions of older people within mass media being a frequently addressed issue for ageing research. The aim of this thesis is to explore how loneliness among older people is constructed and how the responsibility for reducing loneliness is designated within the Swedish news-press.

In *Paper 1* the empirical material consisted of 94 news-press articles from the years 2013-2014. The prime finding was that loneliness was not the main focus in the articles from the Swedish news-press. The concept was used more to motivate the need for political change, enhancing the importance of volunteer work and described as a risk factor within research reports. The material analysed in *Paper 2* consisted of 40 news-press articles from October 2016. The responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people was found to be designated between welfare state institutions on different levels. Institutions and political parties both defend the planned or performed measures to reduce loneliness, but also admit to not doing enough in this regard. Older people were found to be constructed as recipients of activities for reducing loneliness, and the “we” in “society” were those who should perform activities in order to reduce loneliness among older people.

The main overall finding of the thesis is that loneliness was not the main focus in the articles from Swedish news-press. Instead, loneliness was used as a motive for political change and to enhance the value of volunteer work. Furthermore, loneliness among older

people is understood as a problem that needs to be solved. The contexts and logics of the mass media were found to have an influence on how loneliness among older people was constructed, as the issue was mainly addressed in local debate articles with ambitions of achieving change.

Keywords: loneliness, older people, news-press, social constructionism, responsibility

Svenskt abstract

Känslor av tillhörighet med andra människor betraktas som en viktig och universell del av människans existens. Ensamhet är särskilt relaterat till åldrande och äldre människor. Hur ensamhet pratas om och förstås varierar dock beroende på historiska, kulturella och samhälleliga kontexter. Idag är diskussionerna om ensamhet bland äldre människor intensiva inom svensk dagspress. Konstruktioner inom massmedia har visat sig ha ett betydande inflytande på hur äldre människor värderar sitt eget liv och hur äldre behandlas av det omgivande samhället. Få studier har fokuserat på konstruktioner av äldres ensamhet i massmedia, trots det stora antalet studier om ensamhet och trots att forskning om konstruktioner av äldre inom massmedia är en ofta behandlad fråga inom äldreforskningen. Syftet med denna licentiatavhandling är att undersöka hur ensamhet bland äldre konstrueras och hur ansvaret för att minska ensamhet bland äldre utpekats inom svensk dagsspressen.

I *Studie 1* bestod det empiriska materialet av 94 artiklar från svensk dagspress, från åren 2013-2014. Det främsta resultatet var att ensamhet inte utgjorde huvudfokus i artiklarna från svensk dagspress. Ensamhet användes främst som ett begrepp för att motivera behovet av politisk förändring, betona värdet av volontärarbete och för att i forskningsrapporter beskriva riskfaktorer för äldre personers hälsa.

Materialet som analyserades i *Studie 2* var 40 artiklar från svensk dagspress, från oktober 2016. Ansvaret för att minska ensamhet bland äldre utpekades mellan välfärdsstatliga institutioner på olika nivåer. Institutioner och politiska partier försvarade de planerade eller genomförda åtgärderna för att minska ensamhet, men erkände också att de inte gör tillräckligt i frågan. Äldre personer konstruerades som mottagare av aktiviteter för att minska ensamhet, och "vi" i "samhället" var de som borde utföra aktiviteter för att minska ensamhet bland äldre. De främsta resultaten från denna avhandling är att ensamhet inte är huvudfokus i artiklarna från svensk dagspress. Istället användes ensamhet som motiv för politisk förändring och för att betona värdet av volontärarbete. Vidare förstås ensamhet bland äldre människor som ett problem som

behöver lösas. Massmediala sammanhang och logiker visade sig ha ett inflytande på hur ensamhet bland äldre konstrueras, eftersom frågan huvudsakligen behandlades i lokala debattartiklar, med ambitioner om att åstadkomma förändring.

Nyckelord: ensamhet, äldre människor, dagspress, social konstruktionism, ansvar

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List of papers

The articles have been reprinted with the kind permission of the respective journals.

PAPER 1

Agren, A. (2017). "What are we talking about? Constructions of loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press". *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41, 18-27.

PAPER 2

Agren, A., Cedersund, E. (2018). "Reducing loneliness among older people – who is responsible?". *Ageing & Society*, 1-20, First View.

Loneliness among older people in the Swedish media: Constructions, discourses and the designation of responsibility

Introduction

This is a licentiate thesis about how loneliness among older people is constructed through written communication in the Swedish news-press. There are ongoing public debates and alarming reports on the issue of loneliness among older people. Discussions about loneliness are, however, not new. Feelings of belonging or not belonging to other people are commonly described as an essential and universal part of human existence (Moustakas, 1961; Copel, 1988; Dahlberg, 2007). How we talk about and understand loneliness is, however, not stable and is found to vary depending on historical, cultural and societal contexts (Wood, 1986: 193). Today, the well-being and in particular loneliness of older people are considered to be important issues in the Western world. Integration and the alleviation of loneliness constitute part of policies aimed at “successful” ageing (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). According to Perlman and Peplau (1981: 45) an individual's expectations and requirements of social relations are influenced by social norms and these expectations change with age.

Swedes are often described as a lonely people¹ and loneliness and autonomy have historically been central concepts in the development of the Swedish society, before, during and after the establishment of the Swedish welfare state (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015: 22-23). In the work by Berggren and Trägårdh (2015), the authors provide a historical background to the strivings of Swedes towards autonomy. Here the premises for what the authors define as The Swedish theory of love is the idea that “true love” is considered

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¹ One recent example where this idea is prevalent is in the movie ”The Swedish theory of love” from 2015.

to be based on autonomy and not mutual interdependence, indebtedness and subordination towards others (ibid: 22-23). This striving has, internationally and among Swedes, led to understandings of Swedes as a lonely and anti-social people who are more fond of nature than meeting other people (ibid: 29-42). As an example, the English author George Walton Scott wrote, according to Berggren and Trägårdh, the following observation after visiting Sweden during the 1960s:

Swedes are a quiet people, lost in city life. Their boring appearance and mental isolation make a city like Stockholm a white spot on the map of human fellowship.

(Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015: 35)²

In Sweden, loneliness among older people became an issue of public concern during the late 1940s, when the nationally known Swedish author Ivar Lo-Johansson conducted reports together with a photographer to document the current situation within Swedish old people's homes. In Lo-Johansson's work, a wide range of pictures were used in combination with literary work in which dramatic argumentations and historical metaphors served to amplify the alleged dire state of Swedish eldercare in the late 1940s (Wersäll, 2006: 138). Lo-Johansson claimed that loneliness among older people in old people's homes was widespread, as is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Old people's homes is for the villagers the place where so many strange people live. It is the loneliness castle of isolation. Nobody walks voluntarily up the raked pathway.

(Wersäll, 2006: 92)³

The reports triggered public debates and led to the first governmental report on eldercare, where loneliness was a present

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² Translated by author (Axel Ågren).

³ Translated by author (Axel Ågren).

theme (SOU 1956:1. Åldringssvård. Betänkande av 1952 års åldringssvårdsutredning)⁴.

When looking at how loneliness is addressed today, the concept has, according to Rosendale (2007), reached the status of an epidemic that needs to be treated. Commenting on loneliness in relation to older people, Victor *et al.* (2009: 35-37) state that the issue can be understood as a pathological concept in line with problem-oriented perspectives on ageing that have dominated gerontological research for decades. Research on loneliness in later life proceed from an understanding of “old age as a social problem” that needs to be solved (Victor, 2015: 189). This perspective suggests, consequently, that something has to be done in order to reduce loneliness among older people. Thus, someone has to do something in order to achieve this goal. The issue of who is considered responsible and why certain individuals, collectives, organisations or institutions are designated responsibility for reducing loneliness is, however, seldom addressed either in news-press or in research. Studying how responsibility for reducing loneliness is designated and constructed may provide understandings on what type of phenomenon loneliness among older people is considered to be (Loseke, 2003). Analysing this issue enables understandings of whether loneliness among older people is constructed as an individual or collective matter and what levels of society are considered to be affected by the issue of loneliness among older people.

The term responsibility is complex due to its multiple and even contrasting meanings (Solin and Östman, 2015). The designation of responsibility can be used to blame someone for causing, or for not doing enough to eliminate an intolerable situation. It may also refer to responsibilities associated with certain positions in society or to a person or collective considered trustworthy. Bergmann (1998) argues that in order to designate responsibility to others, individuals or collectives of people are considered to have agency and having the opportunity and ability to choose between different ways of thinking and acting. In this thesis, responsibility is viewed as a concept which is negotiated and constructed through communication

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⁴ Swedish Governmental Official Reports: SOU 1956:1.

within the context of Swedish news-press. Responsibility is a central concept within the research field of critical gerontology, where one main topic for study is to understand how older people are constructed regarding roles, duties and positions in society (Townsend, 1981).

There are several public spheres in which social categories such as older people can be constructed and given certain meanings. The mass media is relevant to study as this context is considered to have a substantial influence on how ageing and later life is understood (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2002). Featherstone and Wernick (1995) state that literature, films and other artistic forms of expressions are used to make sense of old age. The ageing body is not solely affected by biological ageing, but is also inscribed with different social and cultural meanings throughout life. Consequently, the stereotypes of ageing, older people and later life held by the general public may have implications for how older people evaluate their life situation (Levy 2003), quality of life and experiences of loneliness (Pikhartova *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, portrayals in the mass media influence how older people are understood and treated in society (Fealy *et al.*, 2012; Koskinen *et al.*, 2014).

As outlined above, this thesis is about how loneliness among older people is socially constructed through written language within the context of the Swedish news-press. The significance of language in everyday life is emphasised by Berger and Luckmann (1966):

The common objectifications of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowman.

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 51)

In agreement with the quote, I consider that the language we use has a profound impact on how we make sense of and construct knowledge about objects, people and events in everyday life. Thus, theoretically this thesis departs from the perspectives of social constructionism, where a main task is to analyse how “knowledge” is taken for granted as “reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 26-27; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002) and an understanding of the world as not objectively “out there”, but rather constructed

through spoken and written language in social interaction. Departing from this perspective, loneliness among older people is, in this thesis, considered to be a phenomenon that can change meaning depending on societal, historical and cultural contexts (Burr, 2003: 3-4). Mass media is a societal context that is found to have a significant influence on how ageing and issues related to older people are understood. In this thesis, focus is on the Swedish news-press since this context is where articles on loneliness among older people are continuously published.

Aim

The overall aim of this licentiate thesis is to study how loneliness among older people is constructed within the Swedish news-press. This aim leads to two main issues being objects for analysis, which are considered central for how loneliness among older people is constructed. Firstly, to study overall constructions of loneliness among older people through examining the meaning(s) loneliness among older people is given within the context of the Swedish news-press. This also leads to examining if there is a prevailing “loneliness discourse” within this context. Secondly, to analyse how the responsibility for reducing loneliness is designated and constructed. When studying this issue, focus is on who is considered to have agency and possessing abilities to choose between actions in order to reduce loneliness. Furthermore, in analysis on how responsibility for reducing loneliness is designated and constructed, emphasis will be on how older people are positioned regarding roles and duties in contemporary society.

Following this aim, the overarching research questions of this thesis are the following:

How is loneliness among older people constructed within the Swedish news-press?

How is the responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people designated and constructed?

Background

Loneliness among older people and the mass media are the central concepts in this licentiate thesis. Therefore, in this background chapter I will mainly present research perspectives on the concept of loneliness, older people and the mass media. The presentation of ageing research will emphasise research on constructions of ageing and older people. This chapter also includes a passage on age stereotypes since several studies reveal that the stereotyping of older people as lonelier than other age groups is persistent. The segment on mass media will focus primarily on central concepts and theories within the field of media research since these concepts and theories have been significant for the two studies in this thesis. I have also attempted to include studies on constructions of loneliness among older people in mass media. According to my overviews, there is, however, only one study with this particular focus, in which constructions of loneliness among older people was studied within the context of the Finnish print-media (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). The section on loneliness will provide a background on how research on loneliness has developed and evolved over time. This overview will give insights into current directions and dominating perspectives within loneliness research.

In relation to the aim of this thesis, emphasis in this background section is on studies that address the role of culture and language in the understanding of loneliness. Loneliness research is, however, not conducted primarily from social constructionist perspectives. Nevertheless, I consider studies with emphasis on significance of language and culture to be of relevance for this thesis, despite studies referred to do not explicitly depart from social constructionism.

Within critical gerontology, one dominating orientation is to analyse how older people are constructed as a category and how older people are affected by social structures and political and economic conditions (Walker, 1981; Estes 1999). These perspectives are of relevance in relation to the aim and theoretical orientation of this thesis. Consequently, I consider this licentiate thesis to be a contribution to critical gerontology, rather than the wide field of

loneliness research, in which social constructionist perspectives rarely occur. In the segment *Critical perspectives on ageing and old age* I will further elaborate the relevance of critical gerontology in relation to this thesis and how I position myself within this field.

Loneliness – an ancient concept but new to research

Considering that the concept of loneliness is seen as an essential aspect of human existence (Copel, 1988) and the amount of public attention given to the issue within mass media⁵, it may seem rather surprising that research on loneliness is relatively new. Although research on loneliness is today extensive and conducted within various fields of research, two definitions seem to serve as standards within research. One of these definitions was developed by Robert Weiss (1973), whereby social loneliness is considered to be caused by the lack of a social network and is a result of not being included in social communities, whereas emotional loneliness results from a lack of intimate relationships (Weiss, 1973). In addition, Weiss emphasised social needs as crucial for not experiencing loneliness. These needs include social integration, reliable alliance, guidance, reassurance of worth and opportunity for nurturance (Weiss, 1974).

The second commonly used definition was developed by Perlman and Peplau (1981). The essence of their definition, often referred to as the cognitive discrepancy model, is summarised in this excerpt:

[...] loneliness is the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively [...]

(Perlman and Peplau, 1981: 31)

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⁵ Loneliness is addressed within various contexts of mass media. The issue is often addressed in internationally distributed newspapers, with headlines such as; "Loneliness grows from individual ache to public health hazard" (Washington Post, 31/1-2016) or "The age of loneliness is killing us". (The Guardian, 14/10-14). In Sweden, articles, from the news-press, have similar headlines on local, regional and national levels. "Older people grow sick from loneliness". (Nerikes Allehanda, 6/12-13), "Involuntary loneliness is a major problem in Sweden, especially among older people" (Piteå-Tidningen, 28/10-16) are two examples of recurring formulations within the Swedish news-press.

These concepts, which have reached the status of standard definitions have, however, been contested and criticised for being too vague, albeit by only a few scholars (Rook, 1984; Wood, 1986: 189). An individual may, for example, be dissatisfied with one characteristic of a social relationship but, simultaneously, content with another. Furthermore, dissatisfaction does not automatically have to evoke feelings of loneliness but may simply lead to discontent (Rook, 1984; Stein and Tuval-Mashiach, 2015). There has been, and still is, an on-going critical discussion regarding the state of loneliness research. In the early days of loneliness research, the prospective was, however, optimistic:

Whatever else happened to the study of loneliness in the later 1970s, perhaps the most important development was that this research came 'out of the closet'. Loneliness is now justifiably a social science topic in good currency!

(Perlman and Peplau, 1981: 56)

This optimistic view on the development of loneliness research raises the question of how this field has advanced over the years. It is, of course, not possible to give an overarching answer to this question since loneliness research today is extensive and spread over various disciplines. Nevertheless, according to Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015), there have been several attempts to define what loneliness is and is not, and investigations of this type are considered to have stagnated, as research has taken other directions and turned to quantitative methods, accepting present conceptualisations as definitive. Johnson and Mullins (1987) emphasised the role of cultural norms in shaping meanings, perceptions and experiences of loneliness. Nevertheless, individual, behavioural and psychological perspectives on loneliness seem to have a more significant role in current research on loneliness (Mullins, 2007). Furthermore, Johnson and Mullins (1987), claimed that studies on loneliness among older people generally focused on the quality and quantity of contacts at the individual level. Rosendale (2007) states that loneliness is commonly perceived as a social or personal deficit in need of correction, which is, according to the author, in line with current advancements of neuroscience and psychopharmacology, where the diagnostic process deconstructs

suffering into a solvable problem. Loneliness is, consequently, understood as a symptom grouped with other symptoms and classified as a mood or adjustment disorder that may be treated with antidepressants. Mullins (2007) argues that the theoretical foundation of loneliness research dates back to the 1950s and 1960s. When referring to a review by Marangoni and Ickes (1989), Mullins (2007) claims that loneliness studies have departed from (1) the behavioural approach, (2) the personality explanations; (3) the cognitive processes approach; (4) the social needs approach–Neo-Freudian; and (5) the social support perspective. One conclusion from this overview is that the foundation for loneliness research has its main focus on the individual’s behaviours, cognition and social needs.

This tendency towards focusing primarily on the individual in loneliness research is also prevalent within social gerontology where macro-perspectives, according to Hagestad and Dannefer (2001), are considered to be lacking. Estes *et al.* (2001) argue that several leading theories of ageing depart from perspectives of biology and social psychology. The focus has traditionally been on the biological breakdown of the individual (Estes *et al.*, 2001) and ageing as a problem caused by individual anxiety and concerns (Phillipson, 1998). These directions of research are considered to contribute to a “microfication” of how the social world of older people is understood (Hagestad and Dannefer, 2001). Although providing various insights into experiences of ageing, social gerontological research is considering not to have acknowledged ageing and the lives of older people in relation to the surrounding environment (Hagestad and Dannefer, 2001). One example of macro-perspectives which is of relevance to this thesis is to acknowledge how older people are constructed regarding roles, duties and positions in society (Townsend, 1981).

The emphasis of loneliness studies within the field of social gerontology appears to a large extent focus on the individual and the problems connected with loneliness and ageing (Victor, 2015: 189). This predominate way of studying loneliness could be one reason why studies from macro-perspectives on loneliness and older people have, to date, only been conducted to a minor extent. This seems to

be the case despite loneliness being intensively discussed on macro-levels within various societies (where the mass media is one macro-level context) and the significant influence of mass media in shaping understandings of various phenomena and social groups, where older people and loneliness are no exceptions.

Previous studies, mainly from micro-perspectives, on loneliness in general and loneliness among older people in particular have provided several important knowledge contributions. Macro-perspectives acknowledging societal and cultural contexts and the importance of language can, however, provide further insights into how and why loneliness among older people is understood in certain ways in today's society.

Loneliness, language and culture

The language used to describe loneliness focuses in contemporary society on the negative aspects of loneliness (Karnick, 2005). Furthermore, it is claimed that people are unwilling to admit to feelings of loneliness as there are social stigmas surrounding the concept (de Jong Gierveld, 1998; Karnick, 2005; Rosendale, 2007). This is, however, a relatively new way of talking about the issue, since the way in which we talk about loneliness has changed over time. Loneliness is an issue that was discussed in ancient times, in the Hebrew and Christian Bible and by philosophers from the 19th and 20th centuries (Karnick, 2005). During the 19th century, loneliness was mainly related to literature and the arts to describe the isolated and lonely poet (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Gradually during this period of time, however, loneliness changed meaning from being a privilege of the cultivated elite to becoming an experience of the general public (Westberg, 2012: 25). Linda Wood (1986: 193) has made a concise exposé of how the loneliness concept has changed in meaning from the turn of the century to the 1970s. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, loneliness described physically isolated people and places. During the 1930-40s, loneliness was used to understand the pathological consequences of physical and social isolation among children. Distress connected to physical separation among adults and children was in focus during the 1940-1960s. Partly overlapping this period of time, throughout the 1950-1960s, loneliness was seen as a

psychiatric condition caused by social isolation. In the 1960s, the first attempts to conceptually separate loneliness from social and physical isolation were conducted. From the 1970s, loneliness was perceived as a feeling separated from isolation, though some associations still occurred. Although not dealing with how loneliness was understood from the 1980s up until today, the exposé above displays how the loneliness concept has shifted in meaning over a relatively short period of time.

The idea of personal experiences and emotions being socially constructed can be understood by referring to Wood (1986: 187-188), who argues that the paradox of loneliness is that it is a non-social and, simultaneously, a social experience. Loneliness is a private yet social experience, since there has to be a consensus in society regarding expectations of relations, in order to be aware of what is missing (ibid: 187-188). Beck Holm (2013: 127-128) considers that, within social constructionism, the distinction between the inner and outer world is not possible since intimate thoughts and emotions are expressed and understood through collective concepts. According to Jylhä and Saarenheimo (2010) not all languages have a precise translation of the concept of loneliness, but there may be concepts describing the feeling of being alone. Perlman and Peplau (1981: 46) exemplify this by referring to the anthropologist Robert Levy's study of a group of Tahitians, where it was found that they did not have words for describing loneliness. Participants in the study did not even use words to describe feelings similar to loneliness. In contrast, the anthropologist Jean Briggs' study of a group of Eskimos indicated that they had several words to describe loneliness.

Studies addressed in this segment acknowledge the significance and dynamics of language regarding the way loneliness is talked about. My overviews, however, indicate that there are comparatively few theoretical and empirical studies on this topic. Furthermore, loneliness research conducted from social constructionist perspectives is almost non-existent. Nevertheless, the studies above emphasise the influence of language and culture in shaping understandings of loneliness.

The mass media

Thompson (2000: 10) argues that media produces, stores and distributes symbols meaningful to those who produce and receive them which is a task that has been conducted by human beings, in different ways, in all societies. Moreover, mediated communication is considered to be embedded in a societal context, which influences what is communicated and how it is communicated (Thompson, 2000: 10-11). The concept of *media logic*, developed by Altheide and Snow (1979), is used to recognise how the media format influences the way media material is structured and how a phenomenon is understood and presented within the media (ibid: 9-10). Mass media today, claim the authors (ibid: 236), have such a dominating role in society that institutions in society follow a media logic when defining solutions of problems. This has contributed to constructing a media culture, characterised by interaction between various participants, and not solely a one-way form in which media dictate definitions of reality. Media logic is so incorporated in society that “seeing” phenomena through media logic has become “normal” (ibid: 236). Furthermore, the media is considered to be a source of legitimation for various institutional practices in society since the media contribute to determining what subjects will be discussed and establish what is relevant for the general community. The authors also argue that leading media institutions influence how other media operate and that media has become the sources to and guardians of information and historical accounts (ibid: 237-238). Furthermore, institutional developments in the modern era have enabled the production of symbolic content on a constantly expanding scale for a market accessible to people spread over time and space (ibid: 10). The development of mass media from the 19th century until today is, according to Thompson (ibid: 76-80), characterised by the following: (1) *The transformation of media institutions into large-scale commercial concerns*; (2) *The globalization of communication*; (3) *the development of electronically mediated forms of communication*. The latter development has implications as much communication is no longer face-to-face but is mediated across great distances (ibid: 81-82). Consequently, people can act based on events at distant locations and act for others who are dispersed over time and space.

Kroon (2001: 242) argues that media debates are dynamic as a result of conscious and unconscious choices of different linguistic and discursive techniques made by journalists. Furthermore, these dynamics are seen as a result of messages travelling between different contexts and participants. The dynamics of language have, according to Kroon (ibid: 247) enabled the participants to accomplish different things in debates. In the media debates studied by Kroon, this possibility has been used to give precedence to certain perspectives while leaving out others.

There are a wide range of studies within the broad field of media research. The concepts and findings presented above are, however, of significance for this thesis as they provide insights into the logics and conditions of the media and how symbols are communicated within this context.

Critical perspectives on ageing and old age

One influential perspective within critical gerontology is the political economy of ageing perspective, where a point of departure is to challenge the idea of older people as a homogeneous group not affected by structures and ideologies within society (Phillipson, 1998; Minkler and Estes, 1999). According to Estes *et al.* (2001) critical perspectives on ageing developed as a response to traditional theories of ageing, often considered to avoid social problems and life conditions of older people and consequently reproduce, reinforce and legitimise ageist attitudes and policies of dependency among older people. The main focus within critical gerontology is on ageing as a social and not biological process, with emphasis on how experiences of ageing result from socioeconomic factors and inequalities throughout the life course (Estes *et al.*, 2001). The theoretical point of departure for the political economy perspective is to a large degree social constructionism, which is summarised by Estes (1999):

How old age is regarded by members of society is also socially constructed by the attributions and imputations of others, which are differentially influenced by those with sufficient power to impose their construction of reality, thereby controlling the dominant reality.

(Estes, 1999: 27)

Estes (ibid: 27) considers notions of old age, such as it being an illness and an economic burden for society, not to be based merely on “facts”, since “real” problems of older people and old age are defined by those in power, for example experts, policymakers and the media.

Having developed the concept of *structured dependency*, among the more influential works for critical gerontology, Townsend (1981) argues that policies and the organisation of care for older people are seen as contributing to structured dependency. Having formulated the concept of Aging Enterprise, Estes (1979) argues that all those who are involved in working to “serve the aged” contribute to socially construct older people as a problem. These concepts were, however, later criticised for accentuating macro- and structuralist perspectives and of overemphasising state-led dependency in comparison with dependencies on the market (Phillipson, 1998; van Dyk, 2014). As a response to this “instrumental gerontology” (Harry Moody’s concept, referred to by Phillipson, 1998) a humanistic approach was developed during the 1980s, where the focus was on meaning and what constitutes a good life for older people and valuing the capacities of older people. Within this approach, emphasis is on how postmodernism has led to a “multiplicity of life styles” making the concept of life course, to some extent, irrelevant and artificial (Minkler, 1996). One central issue for critical gerontologists today is to analyse the active-ageing-paradigm as a re-negotiation of old age and to place this in relation to broader social, economic and political contexts (van Dyk, 2014).

Despite these ongoing debates within the field, which can be seen as academic development, I consider one of the fundamental premises of critical gerontology, namely how older people are constructed in relation to social structures, to be of relevance for this study. Here, the mass media serves as a prime example of a societal context with influence on how ageing and older people are constructed, understood and treated in society, since the mass media is, according to Althiede and Snow (1979: 236), a part of everyday life where “seeing” phenomena through media logic is “normal”.

Constructions of ageing and older people in mass media

Studies on constructions of ageing and older people in society and, more specifically in mass media, are today frequently conducted within, primarily, critical gerontology. Studies with this focus provide important knowledge on how older people are constructed, without, until now, addressing loneliness specifically.

Research on images of ageing and older people within the mass media has increased over the last few decades. One recurring finding in these studies is that there is an ongoing shift from negative to more positive depictions of older people, portraying later life as a time of opportunity, sustained productivity and self-fulfillment (Uotila *et al.*, 2010; Sawchuk, 2015; Ylänné, 2015: 369). This shift towards positive media representations of ageing, older people and later life can, according to Rozanova (2010), be viewed as a response to anxiety about who will provide care for a larger ageing population. The fact that ageing baby boomers are identified as a major consumer group may also be a reason why the media depict retirement in positive terms, promoting a healthy lifestyle through consumption and activity (Rozanova, 2010; Ylänné, 2015: 372-373). Despite the increase in positive images, negative understandings still exist, relating ageing and older people to various problems, such as disease, decline, dependency and older people as being a burden on society (Rozanova, 2006; Robinson *et al.*, 2008; Lundgren and Ljuslinder, 2011). Furthermore, ageing and older people are often depicted in the mass media and in public discussions, from an outsider's perspective, where older people are talked about (Nilsson, 2008). This perspective also applies to how loneliness in old age, within the context of Finnish media, is written about (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). Age identities constructed in Irish newspaper discourses are found to characterise older people by dependency, fading abilities and otherness (Fealy *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, it is found that policy debates today consist of competing discourses between frail–healthy, dependent–independent and burden–self-sufficient (Fealy *et al.*, 2012). In an overview of depictions of older people in advertising, Ylänné (2015: 373) claims that magazines with older people as the target group often focus on activity, health and the importance of taking care of oneself. In line with this argument, Featherstone and Wernick

(1995) state that magazines with older people as a target group are dominated by images of relatively glamorous, youthful and healthy middle-aged and older people. These images are, however, problematic as this consumer-oriented lifestyle is not realistic for many older people and leaves out issues such as illness and coming to terms with the end of life (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995). Furthermore, these ideas of successful ageing are considered to exclude people with disabilities and disregard structural inequalities (Minkler and Fadem, 2002; Holstein and Minkler, 2003).

In advertisements, older people are underrepresented (in relation to population size), present only for specific purposes as they are given age-marked roles and appear in adverts for specific products, which reflect stereotypical expectations linked to older people as a group (Ylänne, 2015: 370). Thus, the rise in presence of older people and increase in positive images can be understood as a way for advertisers to appeal to active older people striving towards ideals of successful ageing which can be achieved through consumption. Williams *et al.* (2010) state that the age of characters is used in a variety of ways in advertisements. Old age may be a negative condition to be overcome through consumption of products, and when marketing glamour products, “young-old” people are cast. Furthermore, older people are often, in advertisement, surrounded by family, often grandchildren, and it is their obligation to remain healthy and financially viable as a responsibility towards the family (Williams *et al.*, 2010).

Several studies on images of ageing depart from content analysis which, according to Williams *et al.* (2010) often conclude that older people are either portrayed “positively” or “negatively”. Furthermore, the authors claim that these type of studies risks missing out on context and the relation between items studied. This reflection of methodology is of significance in relation to this thesis, as the ambition of the analysis is to acknowledge the context, provide insights into how concepts are given meaning and related to one another and, thus, go beyond the dichotomy of concepts such as “lonely” or “not lonely”.

Stereotypes of older people and loneliness

A study on ageing stereotypes conducted in North America suggests that the development and operation of ageing self-stereotypes originate in ageing stereotypes obtained during childhood and are reinforced in adulthood (Levy, 2003). Ageing self-stereotypes and ageing stereotypes towards others are often unconscious and in old age the ageing stereotypes can be adopted. The processes of internalising ageing stereotypes has been found to influence older individuals' cognition, behaviour, will to live and physiological function (Levy, 2003). These findings suggest, therefore, that ageing is not solely an inevitable natural and biological process. Studies indicate that there is a dualistic understanding of ageing and older people in society at present and that older people are often rated high on traits associated with warmth (generous, helpful or kind) and low on competence (forgetful, conservative, narrow-minded or dependent) (Lepianka, 2015). Furthermore, Hummert *et al.* (2004) found that older and younger adults have stereotypes of both older and younger people. Stereotypes have an influence on intergenerational communication (Hummert *et al.*, 2004), where media is considered to play a part in establishing relations between age-groups (Lepianka, 2015).

The stereotype of older people as lonely and loneliness as being a central part of later life is found to be prevalent in various societal contexts. According to my overview, three studies have been conducted with a prime focus on stereotypes in relation to older people, ageing and loneliness. In a quantitative study based on surveys, with older people from the United Kingdom as respondents, Pikhartova *et al.* (2016) found that age stereotypes, where loneliness is part of this stereotype, have a clear influence on older people's experiences of loneliness. Those who accepted these age stereotypes were more likely to experience loneliness later in life. When comparing answers from 1982 with 2005 in a survey on age stereotypes, Tornstam (2007) found that, both in 1982 and in 2005, roughly 90 % of the survey respondents in Sweden agreed with the stereotype that almost half of retired pensioners often suffer from loneliness. A stereotype that, in turn, does not match with results from previous surveys conducted by Tornstam. Similar to the findings of the two studies above, Dykstra (2009) claims, based on

previous studies conducted in different countries, that loneliness among older people is often overestimated and that the image among the general public of older people as more lonely than other age groups is persistent.

These studies highlight that the view of old age as a time of loneliness is one of the most persistent stereotypes of older people in different societies. Studies on stereotypes of ageing and older people risk, however, leaving out that categories such as older people are meaningful in certain contexts, as these types of studies tend to focus on the individuals' behaviours and psychology and are based on attitude surveys or psychological experiments, with less emphasis on the social contexts (Nilsson, 2008: 29). Despite these reservations, I still consider the studies presented above to highlight the enduring stereotypes relating loneliness with older people to indicate a need for more research on how loneliness is constructed. More studies with this focus may raise the questions of how and why this issue is so distinctly related to older people.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical point of departure of this licentiate thesis is social constructionism. In Berger and Luckmanns (1966) pioneering work, the argument for social constructionist perspectives is that:

[...] reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs.

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 13)

According to the authors, one main purpose of a “sociology of knowledge” is to analyse the processes whereby knowledge is being established as “reality” (ibid: 15). The overarching perspective is that the world we live in and its elements are not objectively “out there”, but rather actively constructed by its participants (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 3). This perspective has, however, been debated throughout the past decades. One topic of debate, highlighted in Best's (2008: 46-49) historical overview on the development of

social constructionism, has been the discussion on “ontological gerrymandering”. The core of this term, coined by Woolgar and Pawluch (1985), was that sociologists fail to recognise that the concepts and language they themselves use are social constructions, just as the subjects they study. Within this criticism, it was also considered common that social constructionist analysts failed to be consistent, as many studies referred to objects or phenomena as really existing. This critique resulted in the division between strict constructionism and contextual constructionism. Within the former, the importance of not involving any objectivist assumptions about reality was emphasised. This strict view was, according to Best (2008: 46-49), found impossible as even abstract theorisation relies on some cultural assumptions. Contextual constructionism, on the other hand, departed from the view that people assigned categories and meanings to the empirical world, and the interest for analysts was to understand this in a wider societal context. Within this branch, “ontological gerrymandering” was seen as unavoidable and rather something to be aware of (ibid: 48-49).

In this thesis I will not make distinctions between reality and constructions. The focus is on how loneliness is written about, and not on objective “facts” or “reality”, in order to distinguish, for example, between how loneliness is constructed and how loneliness is in “reality”. Nevertheless, I consider it impossible to deny that the society and culture of which I am a part influences me and I do not deny that loneliness among older people exists. Although stating that there is no objective or “real” measurement of loneliness, I have, to some extent, accepted that loneliness is part of the empirical world, since I use concepts referring to a phenomenon that is present in society. Furthermore, the context in focus, the Swedish news-press, is considered to be a real existing societal context where people interact through written communication.

There are several ways to conduct social constructionist research. The focus of this thesis is on how loneliness among older people is constructed in discourses within the Swedish news-press. Discourse analysis can be understood as an umbrella for numerous theoretical and methodological approaches (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Despite these variations, the common denominator is the

epistemological understanding of the world as socially constructed through language and that discourses are “of central importance in constructing the ideas, social processes, and phenomena that make up our social world.” (Nikander, 2008: 413). Consequently, discourses are essentially certain ways in which phenomena are talked about and understood. A discourse is thus dependent on the societal context and constructed and preserved through communication and social interaction (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Burr, 2003: 3-4).

When conducting this thesis on constructions in the Swedish news-press, a focus on analysing discourses is considered relevant as the media is a context with influence on how we understand and make sense of various phenomena in society. Furthermore, the logics of the media and the societal contexts within which the media is embedded have an impact on how events and phenomena in society are written about. Thus, portrayals in the media can be seen as structured in certain ways in order to be perceived as meaningful for potential readers. In sum, the media, and more specifically the Swedish news-press, produce discourses which may have an influence on how we understand the world around us.

Discourse theory

Discourse theory, as formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) which is the theoretical framework of *Paper 1*⁶, can be described as recognising the constant efforts to fixate meaning within a discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 111; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 32-33). In order to comprehend Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, it is of importance to describe the central concepts developed by the authors. *Elements* are signs⁷ that do not have a fixed meaning. An *element* transforms into a *moment* when it has had its meaning reduced and fixed within a discourse. *Articulation*⁸

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⁶ This segment on theories in *Paper 1* is, to a large extent, retrieved from the original article Agren, A. (2017). “What are we talking about? Constructions of loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press.”. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41, 18-27.

⁷ In this study I consider signs as being equivalent to words.

⁸ Articulation in this study is viewed as the expression of words, i.e. words written in articles from the Swedish news-press.

is described, by Laclau and Mouffe, as all social practices that establish relations between *elements*, with adjusted identities of the *elements* as a result. Laclau and Mouffe consider a discourse to be a structured totality as a result of an articulatory practice (ibid: 105-106).

The process whereby a *sign* (word) shifts from being an *element* to a *moment* is, however, never definite since discourses are surrounded by discursive fields which consist of ambiguity that may potentially undermine the meanings of the discourse (ibid: 111). Nonetheless, fixed meanings are essential for the flow of differences of meaning. According to Laclau and Mouffe (ibid: 112), there are signs that are privileged, around which other signs are organised and given meaning within a discourse. These privileged signs are defined as *nodal points* (ibid: 112).

In *Paper 1*, discourse theory, as formulated by Laclau and Mouffe, served as a theoretical framework and method for analysing what *signs* (words), *elements*, *moments* and *nodal points* are present in articles about loneliness among older people, from the Swedish news-press. This version of discourse theory is considered relevant when studying the news-press, since there is, within this context, an ongoing articulation leading to a flow of *signs* (both *moments* and *elements*) and *nodal points* that can acquire, fixate, change or have their meaning undermined. In the segment *Process of analysis* below, I will describe in detail how this theoretical framework was applied in the analysis.

Subject positions, proto-morality and responsibility

In *Paper 2*⁹, the concept of *subject positions* has been given a prominent role in the analysis (Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Edley, 2001). According to Edley (2001: 209) Althusser (1971) was influential in his works on how people were positioned as “subjects” as a result of ideologies. The concept of *subject positions* has also been used by Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 115) who argue that the subject is not the basis for social relations, since the subject is

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⁹ This segment on theories in *Paper 2* is, to a large extent, retrieved from the original article Agren, A. and Cedersund, E. (2018). “Reducing loneliness among older people – who is responsible?”. *Ageing & Society*, 1-20, First View.

embedded in discursive conditions of possibility. Although being developed and used within Marxist (Althusser) and poststructuralist (Laclau and Mouffe) traditions, the concept of subject position has, since the 1990s, been adapted within discursive psychology. Within this orientation of discourse analysis, subject position emphasises how people position themselves and others within discourses (Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Edley, 2001). This use of the concept subject position can be understood as in line with overall perspectives of discursive psychology, where the focus is on how people in interaction use available discourses in negotiating representations of the world and how selves, emotions and thoughts are shaped and transformed (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 7). Both written and spoken language is, within discursive psychology, considered to contribute to constructions of the world which are oriented towards social actions (ibid: 94).

Analysing how individuals, collectives, institutions and/or organisations are positioned in discourses is relevant for the study conducted in *Paper 2*, since the focus is on designation and constructions of responsibility to reduce loneliness among older people. Positioning has, consequently, served as an overall theoretical perspective in the study. In order to perform in-depth analysis on the particular issue of how responsibility is designated, the concept of proto-morality (Bergmann, 1998) has also been of relevance. The core of the concept is that when we consider other people to have the same abilities as those we believe to possess ourselves, others are regarded as fellow humans who are actors with the ability to choose between different actions. This view on other people is the premise for designating responsibility to others. Consequently, designating responsibility to others is based on the assumption that individuals or collectives are agents with the ability to choose between different actions (Bergmann, 1998). Hence, by using the proto-morality concept, it is possible to analytically ask the question of who is considered to be an actor with the ability to choose from different actions for reducing loneliness among older people.

Reflections on my role as a researcher in social constructionist research

When conducting this thesis, have not departed from certain definitions and understandings of older people or loneliness. Instead, the interest is how these concepts are constructed and negotiated through written communication within the context of the Swedish news-press. Therefore, I have not limited myself to, for example, chronological age or a specific definition of loneliness. I acknowledge that societal images of ageing, older people and loneliness also influences how I understand and analyse my material and therefore it is necessary for me to reflect upon my own role as a researcher. Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 21) argue that one of the challenges when conducting studies on discourses is that the analyst is part of the culture and hence likely to share taken-for-granted understandings which appear in the material. Simultaneously, taken-for-granted understandings are one of the main study objects within discourse analysis (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 26-27). Claiming, for instance, that loneliness among older people is a frequently addressed issue in the Swedish news-press also implies that I, in my everyday life, come in contact with various texts on loneliness among older people that display certain understandings on the issue which may have the status of taken-for-granted understandings. There is, in my view, no straightforward solution to this, as it is impossible to view myself as a “neutral” observer of social issues, detached from and not influenced by the society that I study. A first step in coming to terms with this dilemma is to be aware that the news-press has an impact on me and therefore reflect upon my own role as a researcher and view myself as a person surrounded by the culture and society in which I conduct my research.

Another related challenge when conducting social constructionist research is how to deal with the “truths” that are produced in research if “reality” and “truths” are considered to be socially constructed (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 21). Foster and Bochner (2008: 85) argue that social science is a constructionist practice in itself, as the product is language, which intervenes with and changes the world. Within the field of critical gerontology, there is a discussion on how researchers risk homogenising and even

naturalising the category of “older people” “in order to shelter and protect “old people” from neoliberal activity claims.” (van Dyk, 2014). Despite the focus on critically studying the homogenisation of older people, critical gerontology is considered to risk contributing to do just that, as the category “older people” tends to be used analytically as a stable concept that is taken for granted (Nilsson, 2008: 22-23). In this thesis, I share the approach of Nilsson (2008):

'Older' [people]¹⁰ is a socially constructed category that, in order to continue to exist, like other social categories, always needs to be recreated in communicative practices, such as speech and text.¹¹

(Nilsson, 2008: 9)

Nevertheless, in this thesis and as indicated in its title, the concept “older people” will be applied for analytical purposes, as this is the most common concept used when the Swedish news-press write about loneliness among older people.¹² Although proceeding from this “stable” concept, the focus is on how it is constructed and related to loneliness. Thus, despite using a fixed concept, it is the way in which the concepts are constructed and given meaning that is of major interest in this thesis.

Method and material

Material

The empirical material of this thesis consists of articles from the Swedish news-press. The articles were obtained from the Retriever digital media archive, a database that gathers all printed articles from the Swedish news-press, journals, magazines and business press from 1983 onwards.¹³ News-press was chosen as it possibly

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¹⁰ Word added by author (Axel Ågren).

¹¹ Translated by author (Axel Ågren).

¹² In the Swedish news-press the most common term used is *äldres ensamhet* or *äldre* and *ensamhet* (when used in separate parts of the same article but still addressing the issue). The most equivalent translation of *äldres* or *äldre* from Swedish to English is in my view *older people*.

¹³ <http://www.retriever-info.com/sv/category/news-archive/> 20/12-17

have a larger audience than, for instance, business magazines or journals with specific target groups. Concurrently, the general public have, at least to some extent, the possibility of contributing to how different phenomena are presented and discussed by writing, for example, debate articles.

In *Paper 1*, the search words *äldres ensamhet* rendered 94 news articles published between the years 2013-2014. The motive for analysing these specific years is that loneliness has become a more conspicuous subject in Swedish society during these years and also that I want to provide an overall picture of how loneliness among older people is constructed and given meaning within the Swedish news-press.

The timeframe in *Paper 2* was limited to October 2016, and the search words *äldre AND ensamhet* and *äldres ensamhet* resulted in finding 40 news articles. The timeframe was limited to one month in order to acquire detailed up-to-date insights regarding how the responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people is constructed and designated. This limited timeframe has also enabled a detailed analysis on positioning and discourses of responsibility. No particular event during this month ruled the choice of month.

In both studies, the articles were analysed in the original Swedish language. Excerpts from the empirical material presented in *Paper 1* and *Paper 2*, were translated from Swedish to English by the author (Axel Ågren).

When searching for articles about loneliness among older people from the Retriever database, I found news articles, editorials, debate articles, reportages and chronicles. Articles were published in local, regional and national newspapers. All these different types of articles were included in the two studies. Including all these types of articles has allowed analysis acknowledging the impact of the context and logics of the media and has enabled analysis on both overall constructions and more detailed analysis focusing on responsibility and positioning.

Process of analysis

After having gathered the empirical material as described above, the process of analysis was in the first stage similar for *Paper 1* and

Paper 2, as I read all articles thoroughly and organised them based on the type of newspaper and type of article. Following this first stage, the analysis differed between the studies according to the aim, focus and theoretical approaches of the two studies. Therefore, I will describe the processes of analysis for each study separately.

Process of analysis in Paper 1

The analysis was oriented towards the overall aim of *Paper 1: How is loneliness constructed in the Swedish news-press?* The particular focus was to study whether there is a “loneliness discourse” in the Swedish news-press. In order to conduct a study on constructions of loneliness and whether there is a prevailing “loneliness discourse”, three questions were asked to my material.¹⁴ The first question was: *What societal contexts recur in the material?* The articles were sorted into categories based on the societal contexts that were found to be in focus. Of course, several societal contexts can occur in a news article. I would, however, argue that there is one societal context that is in main focus in every single article from the Swedish news-press. I found that eldercare, politics and issues relating loneliness among older people to the welfare society was the most frequent societal context in the material. Examples of issues addressed in these articles were the lack of time and resources of homecare staff, political debates regarding eldercare and the alleged need for more housing opportunities for older people.

The second most frequently occurring societal context in the articles was volunteer work. During the timeframe for study, an organisation offering coffee breaks with the aim of reducing loneliness was often portrayed in the news-press. The third context was research reports. Although not being a societal context in its own right, the focus was on the findings from research on older people’s health. These findings are further presented and discussed in *Paper 1*.

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¹⁴ The description of the process of analysis in *Paper 1* is retrieved from the original article Agren, A. (2017). “What are we talking about? Constructions of loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press.”. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41, 18-27.

After analysing the material based on recurring societal contexts, I proceeded to ask: *What issues are in the main focus in the articles – is it loneliness, or is it something else?* When asking this question, I looked for the proportion of articles that actually wrote about loneliness or whether the articles were mainly about other topics. This stage of analysis could be described as a content analysis focusing on how often loneliness is mentioned and how much space was used in the articles to address loneliness. If loneliness only constituted a minor part of the articles, it was of interest to analyse what other issues were addressed and took up space in the articles. This question was crucial for the analysis of my material, as it guided me in finding that the main focus was not on loneliness among older people, but rather on other issues.

Following this step in the analysis, I proceeded to the question: *In what types of articles and what types of newspapers is loneliness addressed?* This question was now asked to give insights into what issues that were addressed in what types of articles and newspapers. For example, a debate article by a local politician in a local newspaper about the need for more resources for eldercare may follow different logics (Altheide and Snow, 1979) compared to a reportage on research written by a journalist for a national newspaper. What are considered to be meaningful symbols (Thompson, 2000) within the news-press, is also dependent on the contexts in which the news articles are distributed. Consequently, this question helped me in acknowledging the differences in media logics and how the contexts of the various types of newspapers have an influence on how loneliness among older people was written about.

After performing this process of analysis, I was able to identify recurring themes and the societal contexts that are addressed in the articles from the Swedish news-press. Following this process of reading, overviewing, sorting and categorising the material, I proceeded to the in-depth process of analysing how loneliness among older people is constructed in the Swedish news-press. In order to facilitate this analysis, I started to identify central discourses in the material. As written in the chapter *Theoretical framework*, I consider discourses to be certain ways in which a

phenomenon is talked about and understood, which is dependent on societal, cultural and historical contexts.

Based on the question of recurring societal contexts and the issues that are in focus in the news articles, I was able to find three discourses:

Loneliness – within the discourse of eldercare, politics and the welfare society

Loneliness – within the discourse of volunteer work

Loneliness - within the discourse of research reports on older people's health

To study how loneliness among older people is constructed within these discourses, Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory was used departing from their concepts of *elements*, *moments* and *nodal points*. Thus, I focused on the process where *signs* (words) undergo the process from being an element to becoming a moment and how different signs are related to loneliness among older people. The most essential part of the analysis, however, was to identify nodal points since they have the position of being the privileged discursive points. It is in relation to a nodal point that other signs are organised and acquire meaning. The crucial question in this process was methodological in nature, namely; *how to identify nodal points?* This is not a straightforward process because Laclau and Mouffe do not offer a specific type of method. However, my understanding of nodal points is that they are concepts that dominate articles from the news-press, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and to which other signs (words) are related and given meaning. In other words, I searched for concepts that dominate the articles, regarding not only the number of words (quantitative) but also how concepts are written about and whether there are concepts that are written about in a way that presents them as being of particular importance (qualitative) and thus given a privileged position. The central question was whether loneliness among older people is a nodal point or merely a moment or element that is given meaning in relation to other nodal points.

In the tables below, I summarise the types of newspapers (local, regional or national) and types of articles that occurred in my material. What distinguishes the three discourses will be written about and elaborated further in the *Result* chapter of this thesis.

Table 1. Types of newspaper and types of articles within the discourse *eldercare, politics and the welfare society*.

	News	Editorial	Debate	Reportage/ Reports	Chronicle	Total
Local	12	1	22	1	1	37
Regional	11	2	17	6	0	36
National	1	2	0	0	0	3
	24	5	39	7	1	76

Table 2. Types of newspaper and types of articles within the discourse of *volunteer work*.

	News	Chronicle	Debate	Reportage/Reports	Total
Local	2	-	1	5	8
Regional	2	1	-	2	5
National	-	-	-	-	0
	4	1	1	7	13

Table 3. Types of newspaper and types of articles within the discourse of *research reports on older people's health*.

	Reportage/Reports
Local	2
Regional	1
National	2
Total	5

Process of analysis in Paper 2

After having collected empirical material consisting of 40 articles from Swedish news-press, I proceeded to analyse the material gathered. The analysis process will be described in detail below.¹⁵

First, I read all articles carefully to gain an overview and initial understanding of my material. In the second step, I acknowledged the relationship between the media and societal context (Thompson, 2000), and the concept of media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979) which emphasises that the kinds of methods, conditions and formats that are available within a mass media context have implications on how events and phenomena are written about. As written in the previous segment (*Process of analysis in Paper 1*), there are potential differences in how a phenomenon is written about depending on the type of article and the context within which a newspaper is located.

Analytically, this was first done by sorting the articles in a table based on types of newspapers (geographical distribution area) and types of articles (see Table 4). After sorting the articles based on these criteria, it was possible to divide the articles into categories based on types of newspapers and types of articles.

Table 4. Types of articles and types of newspapers (geographical distribution area).

	News	Editorial	Debate	Culture- reportages	Chronicles	Reportages	Total
Local	6	1	5	-	2	1	15
Regional	12	1	2	2	-	2	19
National	2	3	-	-	-	1	6
Total	20	5	7	2	2	4	40

In the third step, I took into consideration the societal contexts addressed, dominant discourses and how responsibility is designated and constructed in the articles from the Swedish news-press (Table

¹⁵ The description of the process of analysis in *Paper 2* is retrieved from the original article Agren, A. and Cedersund, E. (2018). “Reducing loneliness among older people – who is responsible?”. *Ageing & Society*, 1-20. First View.

5). In this step, the initial emphasis was on identifying prevailing discourses, i.e. the dominant ways in which the issue of responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people was written about. Identifying types of societal contexts addressed also helped to distinguish recurring discourses. In other words, identifying societal contexts recurrently addressed in the Swedish news-press provided insights on what societal contexts the issue of responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people was related to. Thus, finding these dominating societal contexts served as the basis for identifying discourses within which the issue of responsibility was addressed:

Discourse of responsibility within politics and the welfare state

Discourse of responsibility within societal and evolutionary perspectives on loneliness

Discourses of responsibility within seniors' organisations

Following the analysis of identifying discourses, particular focus was on the types of individuals, collectives, organisations or institutions that were designated responsibility for reducing loneliness, how they were positioned as responsible actors and by whom. Focus was also on why certain individuals, collectives, institutions or organisations were considered to be suitable for the task of reducing loneliness. In this phase of the analysis process, the critical questions were:

1. Who: *Who is made responsible for reducing loneliness among older people? Is it individuals, collectives, institutions or organisations that are considered to be responsible for reducing loneliness among older people? Is the responsibility to reduce loneliness a matter for older persons or other instances in society? Is it a collective or individual responsibility?*

2. Responsible actor: *Who is considered to be a responsible actor with the ability to choose between and perform actions in order to reduce loneliness?*

3. Societal context: *What contexts of society are addressed when the issue of responsibility of reducing loneliness is written about?*

4. Blame or trustworthiness: *Is the responsibility connected to blame, implying that individuals, collectives, organisations or institutions have failed in relation to the expectations of a certain position? Or is the responsibility designated to those considered trustworthy? Is the responsibility based on moral or legal assumptions or both simultaneously?*

How the articles were analysed and systematised, based on the questions above is displayed in Table 5 below. The number before each category in the tables are the numbers of the questions presented above. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the news articles, the table starts with *article headline, type of article, newspaper, date and author, geographical distribution area* and a quote.

Table 5. One example from the analysis process:

Article headline:	<i>It is extremely difficult to exist without relationships</i>
Type of article:	Article within a thematic series.
Newspaper, date and author:	Helsingborgs Dagblad 5 Oct 2016. Hanna Welin, journalist.
Geographical distribution area:	Local.
Quote:	<i>Involuntary loneliness, but also alienation, leading to strong malaise. The feelings can come out as anxiety and sometimes even as anger, panic reaction that is deeply grounded, says Peter Strang.</i>

1. Who is made responsible?	Only implicitly as a responsibility for the individual. The focus is on evolutionary developments and the importance for the individual of being part of a collective and having social relations. To a minor extent, eldercare is considered to focus insufficiently on older people.
1. Collective or individual?	Neither. The individual is, however, described as dependent on being part of a collective.
2. Responsible actor	None. Not the individual since developments referred to are considered out of the control for the individual.
3. Societal context in focus in the article:	Focus is on evolutionary developments and on individuals and loneliness as part of human existence, dying patients and eldercare.
4. Blame or trustworthiness?	No particular actor is blamed or singled out as responsible. Partly, eldercare is considered to have too little focus on older people.
4. Legal or moral?	Mainly moral. One short reference is made to the obligations of eldercare. The main focus is, however, on moral dimensions as loneliness is an issue that should be reduced, without referring to legal documents and obligations.

Results

Paper 1. What are we talking about? Constructions of loneliness among older people in the Swedish news-press

The aim of this study is to examine how loneliness among older people is constructed in the Swedish news-press. The study also raises the question of whether there is a dominant “loneliness discourse” within this context. In total, 94 articles from the Swedish news-press from the years 2013-2014 constitute the empirical material. The study recognises that the media is dependent on the societal context and that the logics of the media have an important role in how media material is organised and how a phenomenon is presented and interpreted. This study departs from discourse theory as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), within which the fundamental idea is that a discourse is an outcome of articulation, which is described as dynamic social processes with ambitions of fixating the meaning within specific societal domains. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the process in which a sign shifts from being an element (sign without meaning) to a moment (sign with meaning fixed and reduced) is essential in constructing a discourse, as signs obtain meaning through fixed meanings distinctly different in relation to each other. A definite fixation is, however, considered to be impossible since the discursive field that surrounds a discourse is filled with ambiguity, which can change and undermine the meanings of a discourse. A nodal point is, according to Laclau and Mouffe, a privileged sign around which other signs are organised and to which meaning is given within a discourse (ibid: p 112). In this study, the focus has been on analysing what signs are present in articles from the Swedish news-press, if there is a “loneliness discourse” or if there are other nodal points to which loneliness among older people is given meaning.

The analysis resulted in identifying two dominant discourses. In *Loneliness – within the discourse of eldercare, politics and the welfare society*, loneliness is used as a concept to motivate the need for political change, provision of resources and to underscore *deficiencies within eldercare, politics and the welfare society*. The second discourse, *Loneliness – within the discourse of volunteer work*, mainly portrays volunteers and enhances the *importance of volunteer work*. Within the third and least frequent discourse, *Research reports on older people’s health*, ageing is presented as a risk, with loneliness as one of these risk factors. Although Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue that the transition of a concept from an

element to a moment is never complete, I would claim that loneliness, throughout the empirical material, is given the meaning of being a *problem that needs to be solved*. A central and somewhat surprising finding in this study is that the focus in the Swedish news-press is not primarily on loneliness but rather on eldercare, politics and the welfare society, volunteer work and health among older people. Consequently, my analysis suggests that the articles are organised around the nodal points of *deficiencies within eldercare, politics and the welfare society* (discourse of eldercare, politics and the welfare society), the *importance of volunteer work* (discourse of volunteer work) and *ageing as a risk* (discourse of research perspectives on older people's health). In the Swedish news-press, therefore, these understandings serve as nodal points to which loneliness is related and given meaning.

Paper 2. Reducing loneliness among older people – who is responsible?¹⁶

In the Swedish news-press, loneliness among older people is often addressed as a problem that needs to be reduced. Who is responsible for reducing loneliness and how responsibility is designated is, however, rarely discussed. Studying how responsibility is constructed and designated contributes to knowledge on what kind of phenomenon loneliness among older people is considered to be. Although studying the specific issue of responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people, the study leads to a more general understanding regarding how older people are constructed with regard to their responsibilities and positions in contemporary society.

The aim of this study is to analyse how responsibility is designated and constructed in articles from the Swedish news-press. The focus has been on finding responsibility in discourses, with emphasis on how responsibility is constructed and negotiated and who is

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¹⁶ The first author (Axel Ågren) designed the research, collected the data, participated in data analysis, was responsible for writing the article and approved the version to be published. The second author (Elisabet Cedersund) contributed throughout the data analysis, commented on different versions of the manuscript and approved the version to be published.

positioned as a responsible actor with the ability to reduce loneliness.

The focus has been on identifying responsibility in discourses proceeding from the concept of *subject positions* (Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Edley, 2001). This concept has enabled analysis of how responsibility is negotiated and who is positioned as a responsible actor with the ability to perform actions that reduce loneliness. Furthermore, the concept of *proto-morality* (Bergmann, 1998) was applied to understand how responsibility was designated. This concept focuses on morality in communication and Bergmann (1998) argues that when we ascribe to others equal abilities as those we also consider ourselves to possess, others are viewed as fellow humans who can act in different ways and are hence viewed as responsible actors.

Three prevailing discourses were found, of which the *discourse of responsibility within politics and the welfare state* was the most prevalent. In this discourse there are discussions on how institutions in the welfare state go about their obligation to reduce loneliness. In these discussions, municipalities are designated by a state agency as responsible for talking to older people in order to reduce the alleged widespread loneliness. The municipalities argue, however, that numerous activities are already performed with this purpose. Some municipalities admit, nevertheless, that they should do more to reduce loneliness among older people.

Within the *discourse of responsibility in societal and evolutionary perspectives on loneliness*, the responsibility for reducing loneliness was more complex and even, to some extent, contradictory. On the one hand, societal and evolutionary developments which are beyond the individual's control are seen as contributing to loneliness. When the entire society is addressed as a collective, individuals within this collective are considered to have the ability to act in ways that can reduce loneliness. Noteworthy was that older people are constructed as recipients of activities conducted by "society" with the aim of reducing loneliness.

In this discourse, distinctions are made between involuntary and voluntary loneliness. Involuntary loneliness is the "bad" loneliness,

where the individual is not considered to possess agency and is therefore a victim of loneliness, with older people being described as particularly at risk of loneliness. Voluntary loneliness, the “good” loneliness, is associated with peacefulness, pleasure and ascribing agency to the individual. This loneliness was, however, not related to older people.

In *discourses of responsibility within seniors’ organisations*, the responsibility was both a collective and an individual matter, with a focus on active older persons. Thus, it is the only discourse in which the ideals of active and successful ageing are present.

One central finding of this study was that the responsibility for reducing loneliness and improving well-being among older people is discussed by professionals, politicians, journalists and persons active in civil society. The focus was on how to include older people in society. At the same time, older people were not included in these discussions and constructed as recipients of activities in order to reduce loneliness. Thus, the contrasting concept of *including othering* (Nilsson, 2008) becomes relevant in order to understand how the responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people is designated and constructed in the Swedish news-press.

Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to analyse how loneliness among older people is constructed in the Swedish news-press. This aim leads to two main issues being addressed. First, to examine what meaning(s) loneliness among older people is given and if there is a “loneliness discourse” within the context of the Swedish news-press. Second, to study how the responsibility for reducing loneliness among older people is constructed and designated. The findings have been presented in two articles with a focus on how loneliness is constructed in the Swedish news-press. There are four findings and contributions of this thesis that I will further elaborate and discuss.

Taken-for-granted understandings of loneliness among older people

One prime finding of this thesis worth further discussion is the issue of taken-for-granted understandings of loneliness among older

people. One of the main purposes of social constructionism and discourse analysis is to study taken-for-granted “knowledge” in society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 26-27). Relating to the findings of this thesis, the most frequently recurring understanding of loneliness is that it is a *problem that needs to be solved*. Some articles in the Swedish news-press acknowledge that loneliness, if voluntary, may have positive sides such as peacefulness and time for reflection. These depictions, however, only constitute a minor share of the empirical material, and this type of loneliness is not associated specifically with older people. Regardless as to whether the articles portray loneliness in positive or negative terms, the understanding is that loneliness is a *problem that needs to be solved*. The overarching question, from which the articles from the Swedish news-press proceed, is consequently how loneliness among older people can be solved.

In my empirical material from the Swedish news-press, no other perspectives on loneliness are presented. Additionally, in a majority of the articles, it is concluded that loneliness *is a problem* without further descriptions of *why* it is considered a problem. In articles where the “problem” of loneliness among older people is described, however, expressions such as “loneliness is deadly”, “endemic disease”, “high rate of morbidity and mortality” and a problem in need of a “cure” are common. Loneliness is, thus, understood as a medical problem, as the problem of loneliness is related to severe negative and even fatal consequences for older people’s health. Consequently, I argue that loneliness among older people has reached the status of being an issue with specific taken-for-granted understandings. This relates to other studies, where the understanding of old age as a time of loneliness is found to be one of the most persistent stereotypes regarding older people and old age (Tornstam, 2007; Dykstra, 2009; Pikhartova *et al.*, 2016).

As noted by Ylänné (2015: 370), older people who appear in advertisements are often given age-marked roles which reflect stereotypical expectations linked to older people as a group. I would argue that this applies also to the Swedish news-press, since older people are depicted on the basis of taken-for-granted knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 26-27) and stereotypes of older

people as lonely (Tornstam, 2007). Consequently, the category of “older people” is written about in the articles based on the age-marked role of being lonely. It is expected that older people’s loneliness is widespread and characterised by the “bad” involuntary loneliness. Thus, older people become interesting objects for discussion because of the understanding that loneliness is widespread among older people and that loneliness is a problem that needs to be solved by “society”.

Responsibility

Relating to emerging developments within critical gerontology, there is an ongoing shift from focusing on how policies and social structures construct *structured dependency* of older people (Townsend, 1981) to focus on the re-negotiation of old age (van Dyk, 2014), where it is the individual’s responsibility to age successfully (Rozanova, 2010) and remain active, since activity is the “universal good” (Katz, 2000). Placing the responsibility for care on individuals and family may, Jolanki (2015) argues, be understood as an effort to empower citizens and strengthen family ties. Alternatively, this process can be considered to be an ideological shift putting more responsibility on the individual and family (Jolanki, 2015). Timonen (2016: 1-2) views this as a paradox, as a group of people are urged to be independent, but simultaneously construed as dependent and vulnerable. Katz (2000) argues that the weakening of the welfare state has led to neoliberal policies which “empower” older people to remain active in order to avoid dependency. The question is how these tendencies apply to the Swedish context. It is indicated that there is an increase in privatisation and cutbacks within the welfare sector in Sweden (Warburton and Jeppson Grassman, 2011). Societal developments with more emphasis on individual responsibility are, however, rather complex in the Swedish context, since individual autonomy and independence has been a central element of *the Swedish state individualism* (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015: 22).

The way in which responsibility is designated and constructed, in the Swedish news-press, mainly resides with the concept of *Aging Enterprise* (Estes, 1979). It is those who, in different ways, are engaged in the wellbeing of older people who take part in

discussions, within the Swedish news-press, about how to reduce loneliness among older people and who should be responsible for conducting the task. To some extent, the ideals of active and successful ageing are present in the articles from the Swedish news-press, since the task of reducing loneliness also implies that older people have to be active and take part in activities offered. I would, nevertheless, argue that the way in which responsibility for reducing loneliness is constructed, designates people within the *Ageing Enterprise* as possessing agency with the ability to conduct actions with the objective of reducing loneliness.

Another noteworthy finding regarding designation of responsibility was that the focus in the majority of the articles was on how to conduct activities that increase the inclusion of older people. There is, however, a paradox, as the “we” in “society” is defined as those who can and should be responsible for reducing loneliness among older people, where older people are constructed and positioned (Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Edley, 2001) as receivers of help from “society”. This finding is in line with the contrasting concept of including othering, where older people were found to be constructed as “our others”, an object of national responsibility (Nilsson, 2008: 256).

The understanding of older people as not possessing agency was also present in news articles describing the distinction between voluntary “good”, and involuntary “bad”, loneliness. These findings can be related to other studies, where the media is considered to emphasise the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle by contrasting “good” old age associated with independence, health and a socially active lifestyle, with “bad” old age which is related to illness, physical and social decline, and dependency (Rozanova, 2010).

In the articles from the Swedish news-press, older people were considered to be at risk of involuntary loneliness, which was constructed as “bad” loneliness, with low levels of agency of the individual and leading to negative consequences for health. “Bad” loneliness is, seemingly, closely associated with “bad” old age, i.e. illness, physical and social decline, dependency and older people being viewed as a burden to society (Rozanova, 2006; Robinson *et*

al., 2008; Lundgren and Ljuslinder, 2011). Voluntary loneliness was, on the other hand, constructed as the “good” loneliness, and associated with peacefulness, pleasure and assigning the individual agency and the ability to make choices. This type of loneliness was, however, written about in general terms and not related to older people and, thus, not associated with “good” old age (Rozanova, 2010).

Outsider's perspectives

A central finding of this thesis is that loneliness among older people is discussed from an outsider's perspective. This finding has been discussed throughout the thesis and is in line with findings from previous studies on images of ageing and older people in the mass media (Nilsson, 2008; Uotila *et al.*, 2010). The finding raises the question of the implications this may have on how loneliness among older people is constructed. Considering loneliness to be written from an insider's perspective would imply that either the author of a news article or I myself, in the role of a researcher, has made a clear definition of what an insider in the category of “older people” is. As there are very few news articles, in my empirical material, which are stated to be from a perspective of “older people”, it is not possible to compare “insider” and “outsider” articles. Furthermore, insider's perspectives do not necessarily mean that the issue would be constructed differently. The outsider's perspective also has a practical reason, as older people, if we are talking about retirees, have less opportunities to produce texts within the context of the news-press. Consequently, even if more news articles focused on the perspectives of older people, the articles - except perhaps some debate articles published - would still be written by a non-retired journalist and be subject to the contexts and logics of the media (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Thompson, 2000). Regardless of this, the articles which constitute my empirical material are written by journalists, politicians or engaged citizens (who do not refer to their chronological age or consider themselves belonging in the category of “older people”). This finding can be related to the works of Estes (1999: 27), who argues that understandings of problems related to old age and older people are defined and constructed as “facts” by those in power.

The outsider's perspective could also explain one of the main findings of this thesis, which is that the prime focus in the news articles is on those who perform or claim the need for- activities aimed at reducing loneliness, similar to findings of another study (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). This was particularly apparent in news articles about volunteer work, where the volunteers motives for volunteering and even their personal life was described in detail. In contrast, the older person's motives for taking part in activities was not written about.

Media logics

In this thesis, the logics and contexts of the mass media have been acknowledged (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Thompson, 2000). But what does this actually mean? My understandings and methodological use of these concepts has been rather pragmatic, as they have been utilised to analyse who the author of the articles was, type of format of the articles, type of newspaper (geographical distribution) and what contexts are described in the articles. Although looking "simple", these questions have provided fruitful insights regarding how loneliness and responsibility for reducing loneliness is designated and constructed in the Swedish news-press.

Since there seem to be taken-for-granted understandings of loneliness among older people within the Swedish news-press, the amount of space allocated in the articles to describing the issue is relatively small. Consequently, there is more space for writing about other issues. This may be one reason why loneliness was not in the main focus. Relating to the concept of *media logic* (Altheide and Snow, 1979), where formats of the media are considered to influence how media materials are organised and how a phenomenon is interpreted and presented, the way in which loneliness among older people is constructed follows certain structures where headlines, preamble and the introductions of the articles often address loneliness. In the rest of the article, however, focus is on other issues. This indicates that loneliness is not in need of further explanations and that the concept is used to attract attention to others issues. This finding is in line with Thompson's (2000) argument that the media distributes symbols which are perceived as meaningful within a societal context.

Williams *et al.* (2010) argue that there is a tendency in studies on images of ageing and older people to merely perform content analysis and study dichotomies, focusing on portrayals as either positive or negative. These approaches risk, according to the authors, missing out on contexts and relations between the items studied. In this thesis, the ambition has been to go beyond merely analysing how loneliness among older people is constructed and the contents of the news articles. When departing from this ambition, focus has been on acquiring understandings of the media contexts in which the issue of loneliness is embedded in and its implications for how this issue is constructed. Acknowledging the logics and contexts of the Swedish news-press has, for example, revealed that loneliness is mainly discussed in debate articles in local newspapers which have an influence on how loneliness and responsibility are constructed. This has led to the finding that loneliness among older people is being mainly constructed as an issue for the municipalities and local politicians. Consequently, I consider this thesis to contribute to understanding how the conditions, contexts and logics of media have implications for how loneliness among older people is constructed.

Concluding remarks

Looking ahead, since loneliness is consistently closely related to ageing and older people, it would be of relevance to analyse how loneliness among other age groups in society is constructed within the news-press. Furthermore, the constant flow of texts and images within the news-press, and the mass media in general, enables studies of constructions of loneliness within various types of mass media contexts from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Studies with a focus on constructions within different societal contexts, within countries and cross-cultural comparisons can contribute to further insights on how cultural and societal contexts influence how loneliness is constructed and understood.

Finally, I consider that a contribution of this thesis is the way in which it has been conducted, ultimately asking the question; “What is the talk about?”. Thus, although focusing on constructions of loneliness among older people, I consider that asking these types of questions in relation not only to articles from the media, but to

different kinds of public discussions on various social issues and phenomena may open the way for analysis that reveals that public discussions actually focus on other issues and have intentions other than those that appeared at first sight.

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Summary in Swedish

Äldre personers ensamhet i svensk media: Konstruktioner, diskurser och utpekande av ansvar

Känslor av tillhörighet med andra människor ses generellt som en viktig och universell del av människans existens (Moustakas, 1961; Dahlberg, 2007). Hur ensamhet talas om och förstås varierar emellertid, beroende på historiska, kulturella och samhälleliga kontexter. Idag pågår diskussioner inom svensk dagspress om ensamhet bland äldre människor. Konstruktioner inom massmedia, i denna avhandling mer specifikt svensk dagspress, har ett betydande inflytande på hur äldre människor värderar sitt eget liv och hur äldre personer behandlas av det omgivande samhället (Pikhartova *et al.*, 2016; Fealy *et al.*, 2012).

Syftet med denna licentiatavhandling är att undersöka hur ensamhet bland äldre människor konstrueras och hur ansvaret för att minska ensamhet utpekats inom den svenska dagspressen.

Ett centralt fynd från denna licentiatavhandling är att ensamhet inte var i huvudfokus i artiklarna från svensk dagspress. Begreppet används istället för att motivera behovet av politisk förändring, betona vikten av volontärarbete och för att beskriva riskfaktorer för hälsan kopplade till åldrande.

Ansvar för att reducera ensamhet bland äldre visade sig utpekats mellan välfärdsstatliga institutioner på olika nivåer. Institutioner och politiska partier försvarade de planerade eller genomförda åtgärderna för att minska ensamhet, men erkände också att de inte gör tillräckligt i frågan.

Ett av de främsta resultaten från avhandlingen var att ensamhet bland äldre människor förstås som ett problem som måste lösas. Dessutom beskrevs frågan framför allt ur ett utifrånperspektiv. Massmediala kontexter och logiker visade sig ha ett inflytande på hur ensamhet bland äldre konstrueras, eftersom frågan huvudsakligen behandlas i lokala debattartiklar med fokus på politik, äldreomsorg och välfärdssamhället. Äldres ensamhet fungerade i de analyserade artiklarna som ett motiv för att förstärka

argument rörande behov av politisk förändring och behovet av ökade resurser för, i första hand, äldreomsorg och boende för äldre.

STUDIE 1. Vad pratar vi om? Konstruktioner av ensamhet bland äldre i den svenska dagspressen

Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka hur ensamhet bland äldre människor konstrueras i svensk dagspress. En övergripande fråga i denna studie är om det finns en dominerande "ensamhetsdiskurs" i denna kontext. Totalt 94 artiklar från den svenska dagspressen, från åren 2013-2014, utgör det empiriska materialet för studien. En utgångspunkt för studien är att kommunikation inom massmedia är beroende av den samhälleliga kontexten och att medielogiken spelar en viktig roll för hur material är organiserat samt hur ett fenomen presenteras och tolkas (Thompson, 2000; Altheide och Snow, 1979). Denna studie utgår från diskursteori, som utvecklats av Laclau och Mouffe (2001). Diskursteorin vilar på idén om att en diskurs är ett resultat av artikulering¹⁷, vilket beskrivs som dynamiska sociala processer med ambitioner att fixera betydelser inom specifika samhällsdomäner. Enligt Laclau och Mouffe (2001) är processen i vilken ett tecken¹⁸ skiftar från att vara ett element (tecken utan mening) till ett moment (tecken med fixerad och reducerad mening) viktig vid konstruktionen av en diskurs, eftersom det är genom bestämda betydelser som skillnader mellan tecken (ord) ges innebörd. En slutgiltig fixering av mening anses emellertid vara omöjlig eftersom det diskursiva fältet som omger en diskurs fylls med tvetydighet, vilket kan förändra och undergräva betydelsen av en diskurs. En nodalpunkt är enligt Laclau och Mouffe (2001) ett privilegierat tecken som andra tecken, inom en diskurs, är organiserade runt och ges mening i förhållande till (ibid: 112). I denna studie har fokus varit på att analysera vilka tecken som förekommer i artiklar från svensk dagspress, om det finns en "ensamhetsdiskurs" eller om det finns andra nodalpunkter gentemot vilka ensamhet bland äldre människor får mening. Variationer i

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¹⁷ Min tolkning av artikulering är att det syftar till uttalande av ord. Då dagspress är i fokus blir artikulering det skrivna ordet som kommer till uttryck i tidningsartiklarna.

¹⁸ Min tolkning av tecken är att det motsvarar skrivna ord.

medielogiker och kontexter samt dess möjliga konsekvenser för hur ensamhet bland äldre människor beskrivs har också varit i fokus.

Analysen visade att det finns två dominerande diskurser, och en tredje mindre förekommande diskurs. Inom *Ensamhet – inom diskursen äldreomsorg, politik och välfärdssamhället* används ensamhet som ett begrepp för att motivera behovet av politisk förändring, resursfördelning och för att understryka brister inom äldreomsorg, politik och välfärdssamhället i stort. I den andra diskursen, *Ensamhet - inom diskursen för volontärarbete*, är fokus främst på att porträttera volontärer och att betona vikten av volontärarbete. I den tredje och minst förekommande diskursen presenteras forskningsrapporter om äldre människors hälsa, där åldrande presenteras som en risk och ensamhet utgör en av dessa riskfaktorer.

Även om Laclau och Mouffe (2001) hävdar att övergången från ett element till ett moment aldrig är fullständig skulle jag hävda att ensamhet, i det empiriska materialet från svensk dagspress, ges meningen av att vara *ett problem som måste lösas*. Ett centralt och något överraskande resultat utifrån denna studie är att fokus i den svenska dagspressen inte främst riktas på ensamhet utan snarare på äldreomsorg, politik och välfärdssamhället, volontärarbete och hälsa bland äldre. Min analys visar att artiklarna snarare är organiserade kring nodalpunkterna bristerna inom äldreomsorg, politik och välfärdssamhället (diskursen om äldreomsorg, politik och välfärdssamhället), vikten av volontärarbete (diskursen om volontärarbete) och åldrande som en risk (diskursen om forskningsperspektiv på äldre människors hälsa). Därför fungerar dessa förståelser i den svenska dagspressen som nodalpunkter till vilken ensamhet relateras och ges mening.

STUDIE 2. Att reducera ensamhet bland äldre människor - vem är ansvarig?

I svensk dagspress beskrivs ensamhet bland äldre människor ofta som ett allvarligt problem som måste reduceras. Vem som anses ansvarig för att minska ensamheten och hur ansvaret utpekats diskuteras dock sällan. Att studera hur ansvaret konstrueras och utpekats bidrar till kunskap om vilken typ av fenomen ensamhet

anses vara. Trots att fokus är på att studera den specifika frågan om ansvar för att minska ensamhet bland äldre människor, kan studien leda till en mer allmän förståelse om hur äldre människor konstrueras med beträffande ansvar och positioner i det moderna samhället.

Syftet med denna studie är att analysera hur ansvaret för att reducera äldre människors ensamhet utpekats och konstrueras i artiklar från svensk dagspress. Fokus har varit på att undersöka hur ansvaret konstrueras, förhandlas och vem som positioneras som en ansvarig aktör med förmåga att minska ensamheten.

I *Diskursen om ansvar inom politik och välfärdsstat* diskuteras om institutioner inom välfärdssektorn fullgör sitt ansvar för att minska ensamhet. I den här diskursen är en rapport som utarbetats av Socialstyrelsen, vilken påvisade utbredd ensamhet bland äldre inom äldreomsorgen, ett ämne som diskuterades. I dessa diskussioner utpekar en statlig myndighet alla kommuner som ansvariga för att prata med äldre för att minska den omfattande ensamheten. Kommunerna anser dock att många aktiviteter redan utförs med avsikt att reducera ensamhet. Vissa kommuner erkänner dock att de borde göra mer för att minska ensamheten bland äldre.

Att ge en institution skulden för otillräckliga insatser för att minska ensamheten och samtidigt utpeka samma institution som ansvarig för att genomföra framtida insatser kan innebära att den berörda institutionen, trots allt, anses vara mest lämplig för uppdraget. Oavsett om institutioner eller politiska partier ges skuld eller anses trovärdiga, är de konstruerade som aktörer med förmågan att välja mellan olika åtgärder för att minska ensamhet bland äldre.

I *Diskursen om ansvar inom samhällliga och evolutionära perspektiv på ensamhet* är ansvarsutpekandet för att minska ensamhet mer komplext och i viss mån motsägelsefullt. I denna diskurs finns det en ambivalens kring huruvida enskilda individer anses vara en aktör eller inte. Å ena sidan anses samhällliga och evolutionära utvecklingar, vilka ligger utanför individens kontroll, bidra till ensamhet. När hela samhället benämns som ett kollektiv anses däremot individer inom detta kollektiv ha förmågan att agera på sätt som kan minska ensamheten. Det är dock noterbart att äldre

människor är konstruerade som mottagare av aktiviteter som utförs av "samhället" för att minska ensamheten. Följaktligen talas det *om* äldre människor, men de inkluderas inte i den pågående debatten om vem som ska vara ansvarig för att minska ensamhet bland äldre människor.

I denna diskurs görs även skillnader mellan ofrivillig och frivillig ensamhet. OFrivillig ensamhet är den "dåliga" ensamheten, där individen inte är en aktör utan offer för ensamhet. Äldre personer beskrivs här som särskilt sårbara för ensamhet. Frivillig ensamhet, den "goda" ensamheten, är förknippad med ro, glädje och är förknippad med en situation i vilken individen beskrivs som en aktör med möjligheten att göra val. Den "goda" ensamheten relateras dock inte till äldre personer.

I *Diskursen om ansvar inom seniororganisationer* är ansvaret både en kollektiv och en individuell fråga, med fokus på aktiva äldre personer som själva gör insatser för att reducera sin egen och andras ensamhet. Således är detta den enda diskurs inom vilken idealen om aktivt och framgångsrikt åldrande är närvarande.

Ett centralt resultat i denna studie är att ansvaret för att minska ensamhet främst diskuteras av de som befinner sig inom *Aging Enterprises* (för att använda Estes' (1979) begrepp), alltså professioner, politiker, journalister och personer som är aktiva i det civila samhället som på olika sätt arbetar för äldres välbefinnande. Även om ett av huvudmålen, som beskrivs i nyhetsartiklarna, är att inkludera äldre i sociala sammanhang, kan utifrånperspektivet ses som bidragande till att konstruera äldre människor som passiva och inte själva kapabla att genomföra aktiviteter för att minska ensamhet. Således blir begreppet *inkluderande andrafierng* (Nilsson, 2008) relevant för att förstå hur ansvaret för att minska ensamhet bland äldre människor konstrueras i svensk dagspress, då detta begrepp beskriver äldre personer som "våra andra", de som det talas om (Nilsson, 2008). Intentioner om inkludering av äldre personer blir alltså på samma gång exkluderade, då det inte är äldre personer som deltar i diskussionerna samtidigt som äldre personer konstrueras som mottagare av "samhällets" insatser.

Trots att ansvaret för att utföra aktiviteter för att minska ensamhet konstrueras som en uppgift för *Aging Enterprise* (Estes, 1979), utesluter det inte att äldre människor kan konstrueras som ansvariga för att minska ensamhet av personer inom detta "Enterprise", i linje med nuvarande ideal om aktivt och framgångsrikt åldrande där mycket ansvar läggs på den enskilde individen. I denna studie har det dock framkommit att det sätt på vilket ansvaret för att minska ensamheten utpekas, i huvudsak är i linje med *Aging Enterprise* och *inkluderande andrafiering* och endast i mindre utsträckning kan relateras till ideal om aktivt och framgångsrikt åldrande.

Papers

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