

Psychology of Loneliness and Isolation in Old Age: A Review of Illiterate Old Women in Yoruba Communities

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Abstract

Old age is one of the developmental stages that everyone wishes to reach in life. It is a period that reflects how one's early life has been spent. The cause and effect of developmental growth may result to happiness or regret. Illiterate old women are the focus of this paper. Their inability to be exposed to formal education seems to have been responsible for some of the stress they pass through in life. Loneliness has been identified as the psychological problem of the aged. These old women feel lonely and isolated; sometimes because of the experiences of life they had passed through in the past. Some have suffered maltreatment in their marriages, abandoned by their children and family members. Poverty, losses, and depression have been identified to be the cause of loneliness and isolated life. Passing through old age successfully requires strong social support from family and friends. Old people should be encouraged to belong to social group where their psychological, spiritual and financial needs would be met.

Keywords: psychology, loneliness, isolation, old, age, illiterate

Introduction

Old age is one of the developments that seem fearful to some people. The old age is not the problem but what the old people are faced with, is the cause of fear. It is during this stage of development that one starts losing his or her beauty, becoming weaker in strength, retiring from place of work either to another good business or to nothing. At this age, many old people cannot do any tedious work again as usual. The researcher observed that in Yoruba communities, many old women prefer to stay in their home towns rather than any other place. Even when they travel to help their children to cater for their grandchildren in the cities, they still prefer to come back home to live the rest of their lives in their home towns. This is because they believe that it is better for one to return home to die than to die in a strange land. The connectedness in Yoruba culture seems to be a plus for some of these old people. Even when their biological children are not available to cater for them, people around them can be of great help. Any old person in Yoruba community is seen as everyone's father or mother and young people around them are seen as their children. Connectedness is a strong cord in Africa compared to any part of the world, and this makes loneliness not to be felt as such by some old women in the Yoruba community. In other parts of the world such as in the USA, according to

Glicken (2003), their culture emphasises individual achievements, competitiveness and impersonal social relations and that loneliness may be quite pronounced in the face of such socially alienating values. This does not imply that all the people in such cultures are lonely; loneliness sometimes is a thing of the mind.

Semat (1978) defines loneliness as an experienced discrepancy between the kinds of interpersonal relationship that the individuals perceive themselves as having and the kind of relationship they would like to have. When an individual is experiencing something different from what he or she desires in life, loneliness may set in. A woman might have perceived marriage as the solution to all her emotional problems but after getting married she realised that it was not so. The husband is always travelling from one country to the other; such a woman would experience loneliness because her expectation and perception were proved wrong by what she is feeling in reality. Young (1982) defines loneliness as the perceived absence of satisfying social relationships accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress that are related to the perceived absence. A woman whose husband abandons her for no just reason or because of work, business or other women may feel lonely because the husband who is supposed to be the closest person to her is not always available. So, she could feel some psychological distress of thinking alone and getting things done alone. Unik and Demir (2003) define loneliness as an unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of relationship is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity. The network of relationship starts from the family, friends, extended family and the likes. The moment people have nothing to gain from someone, they may not be too worried to associate with such person but in a situation whereby the old illiterate woman in this context is rich, she will always have people around her. Murphy (2000) describes loneliness as a condition with distressing, depressing, dehumanizing, detached feelings that a person endures when there is a gaping emptiness in his or her life due to an unfulfilled social and emotional life. The illiterate old women are sometimes left alone in their old age because they may be poor to sustain themselves; some have lost their husbands, and their children have left them to fend for their survival. They depend on good Samaritans to keep going.

Approaching loneliness from sociological perspectives means to study how old people are described, framed, judged, discussed, related with and handled by different members of the community. There are some modalities that are put in place in Yoruba setting that help old women to cope with loneliness. Some of such modalities are discussed below.

Measures to Combat Loneliness in Yoruba setting

The Yoruba community seems to believe that a woman must not be idle and also that she should be fully engaged at least in petty business to fetch her money. Many of such illiterate women are involved in selling items like pap, provisions, raw food, cooked food, local soap, and the likes. Sometimes, these items are purchased on credit, sold and

later repaid to the source it was borrowed from. The profits made from such transactions are kept as savings. Therefore, going to the market to sell their products keeps them busy and alive. In the market place, they interact with their peers; join some local savings scheme and other activities that keep them active.

To avoid loneliness, some old people are taken away to where their children stay; it could be within or outside the country. Others are catered for by their church members. Others may be involved in animal husbandry. They keep birds, goat and sell them to sustain themselves financially. Getting involved in all the above activities has a way of keeping the illiterate old women busy in the Yoruba community. Despite the fact that they are hardworking and committed to their little works, many of them are culturally stigmatised, and this may lead to loneliness. According to Abiodun (1989), womanhood in Yoruba setting is full of complexity and contradictions. They are viewed as wives, daughter, mother, auntie, sister and witches. As wives they are strong pillars to their husbands, as mothers the lives of their babies depend on them. According to Sofola (1998), what a woman can do, a man cannot do. Only mothers have the breast milk to give to a child for the first six months of life. This important function cannot be performed by men, because they do not lactate. It is also believed that this same wife and mother can kill the husband and the baby as a witch. What a contradiction.

According to Victor, Burholt and Martin (2012) some old people feel lonely because of the loss of husband, illnesses, depression, lack of friends and social network. Clifford (2010) in McLeod (2013) describes culture as historically transmitted pattern of meanings in embolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes towards life. The Yoruba culture views women as the property of their husbands and as such, they must endure whatsoever the suffering may be in homes of their husbands (Makinde, 2004). If a married woman in this culture chooses to leave her husband, she has lost her dignity as a married woman according to the culture. For this reason, many prefer to suffer loneliness and isolation rather than divorcing or separating themselves from their husbands.

Sometimes, cultures are strictly obeyed by illiterate old women because they are not exposed to formal education. Their counterparts who are well educated are better off because they have money to take care of themselves. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004), enlightened women are apt to face social disapproval and punishment for refusing to acquiesce to socially determined rules and expectations. They are economically empowered to face life challenges even though everyone has a time when they feel down, discouraged, sad, and empty and when life seems discouraging and difficult.

Causes and Impact of Loneliness on Old women

From the observation of this author who has lived among the Yoruba communities for more than two decades, and as confirmed by literature, the impacts of loneliness on old illiterate women cannot be overemphasized. According to Cacioppo, Hawkley and Berntson (2003), feeling of loneliness and social isolation are associated with increased risk for inflammatory diseases. A number of physical illness such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular illness, decreased cognitive functioning and limited immune system have been singled out in research to be the resultants of loneliness.

To Rokach, Orzeck and Felix (2004), the important factors affecting the individuals experiencing loneliness are the culture and the family in which old persons developed. Loneliness can also lead to depression when there are age-related losses or challenges. Depression according to Stewart (2013) is a complaint ranging from mild sadness to a state in which a victim loses all interest in normal activities, becomes extremely gloomy and often spends a great deal of time to wake up from bed. The physical symptoms of depression include sad demeanour, inability to sleep, loss of energy, uncontrollable crying, lack of appetite, guilt and worthlessness, disturbed sense of time and digestive problems. In addition, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, loss of weight, loss of sexual functioning and pains are common manifestations of depression. Wallis (2000) reports that depression may result in psychotic-like symptoms including hallucination and a loss of being in touch with reality, that depression rate of 6% occurs among older adults because of the loss of loved ones, loss of status related to work, financial insecurities, lack of a support group, a growing sense of isolation and a lack of self-worth. Mavandadi, Sorkin, Rook and Newsom (2007) found a strong relationship between negative social interaction with older adults and physical pain and depression.

From observation, envy and jealousy seem to be some of the emotional problems among women generally. They seem to compete for the number of children, their husband achievement, and children's achievement and so on. These illiterate women sometimes fight on trivial things, by attacking themselves physically or spiritually. In a situation where the husband loves a wife more than the other wives, it gives room for more competition. After the demise of such husband, the favourite wife in question will suffer a lot because all that the husband had given her shall be taken away from her.

In most cases, many of these illiterate old women look ugly, poor and skinny because of their involvement in hard labour. Consequently, they may be labelled as 'witches,' and they can be hindered from selling their goods in the markets. According to Abiodun (1989), women of any age are seen as potential witches in Yoruba settings but not the entire women are witches. They can also be sent away from the community. Such wrong allegations can lead to loneliness which might lead them to isolate themselves from the communities.

Experience of life is another reason that could lead to loneliness. The author was able to interact with three old illiterate women who shared their life experiences with her. They were born and reared in Yoruba communities in South West Nigeria sixty years ago. The first old woman was born in the early forties. She did not have the opportunity to attend a formal school. This made her to marry early; she got married to a man who was introduced to her by her uncle. After some years when she had already given birth to four children, she encountered problem with her uncle when he instructed her to pack out from her husband's house because he had discovered another man for her. She said she left the husband reluctantly. She narrated that in those days one must obey the directive from elders without querying them. Her uncle now gave her to one retired army officer. In the second marriage, she was able to give birth to four children as well. When her uncle died, it was then that she was free to leave the second husband's house because she said she did not love the man; she was only staying with him because of the fear and respect she had for her uncle.

She could not go back to her first husband. This made her to marry the third husband where she gave birth to a son. She said she did not enjoy the third husband because he was a polygamist. Due to constant quarrel with other wives, she left the man and decided to stay without marrying another man again. The children she gave birth to for the first husband were not happy with her because they complained that her departure made them to be distributed to relatives and so they are not interested in taking care of her in her old age. The children from the second husband were unfortunate too because they lack motherly support while growing up. They became illiterates like her; they took to farming, driving and other menial jobs. The first son was poisoned by his wife and he died. This was because she was jealous that he as a driver was moving with other women. The second son was killed by the third son who took to hard drugs. He was high one day and he killed his brother. He became insane and later died as a mad man on the street. The last girl was given out to a relative to stay with. She was ten years old when she developed a chronic disease and she also died. In tears, she narrated that she lost all the four children she had for her second husband. The only son she gave birth to in her third marriage dropped out in the junior secondary school. Now in her old age, she said she is very lonely, sad and feel isolated. She said she is living in regret often.

The second old woman narrated her ordeal and why she is feeling lonely today. She married early because she did not have formal education. She said after giving birth to her first girl child, she had delay and this made her husband to marry another woman. She said this singular action of the husband really affected her love for the husband. She said she was in her late fifties when she suddenly discovered that she was pregnant. She gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. When the boy was five years old, one afternoon he slept and cried out from his sleep and suddenly the boy became deaf. This made her to be more miserable and sad. Now, she is old and her first daughter is married. The deaf son is married and she is left alone with the other wives and the husband. Even when in their midst, she said she still feels lonely.

The third illiterate woman too narrated her experience; she said in those old days, a woman could be kidnapped and be forced to marry a particular man. She said one fateful day, her mother sent her to hawk kolanuts and suddenly she saw some men and they pretended to be buying kolanuts from her. They forcefully carried her to the king's palace. That was how she was forced to marry one of the king's sons. She said she did not love the man at all, and this was shown in her attitude to the man. She said the husband used to beat her on any slight provocation. She said she only enjoyed her life anytime the man travelled for his business transaction. She was able to give birth to two children, a boy and a girl. She said one day the husband travelled to the northern part of the country and told the wife that he might not come back in time. She said that was his normal routine. He could travel for six months and he would return for two or four months. She said she was proved wrong because the husband had not returned since he left in 1972. She said it was a mixed feeling situation for her. The family members call her names because the husband could not be traced or located up till today.

Analysing the above stories from Rogerian point of view shows that loneliness can be seen as the manifestation of poor adjustment. Rogers believed that the cause of loneliness lies with the individual's phenomenological discrepancy in one's self-concept. The belief is that it is the current experiences that produce the problem. To Roger in Cooper, O'Hara, Schmid and Wyatt (2007), people can be aware of the most significant determinants of their lives if they are provided with an environment in which they feel safe enough to do so. Experience is what is immediate, current, fresh, and present with us; it could be in the past or in the future events only if they are seen as memories. According to Lietaer (2002), experience is private and it has an inward or inner quality. It is subjective, which implies that, it is peculiar to the individual person. Experience takes place within the opaque organism of the experienter and may not be public or even repeatable. To Cooper (2003), experience has a bodily dimension to it. The person who experiences the situation feels the pains sensually, affectively and psycho-physiologically. This implies that experience is what the experienter receives within, through all the sense modalities.

Coping with Loneliness in old age

Individuals' coping strategies are affected by individual's age, life experiences, cultural background and the available method of alleviating loneliness. Most old adults cope with loneliness through the following measures:

Social Support: Social support refers to having a group or network of family or friends who provide strong social attachments; being able to exchange helpful resources among family or friends and feeling or making appraisal that we have supportive relationships and behaviours. Martin and Brantley (2004) see social support as help, advice, sympathy and reassurance from family or friends which can decrease the effect of stressful experiences.

Another aspect of social support is the religious involvement. George, Larsson, Koenih, and McCullough (2000), reported in 28% of the studies they carried out in attempting to determine the existence of a relationship between religion and health, they found that religious involvement reduces the likelihood of disease and disability. Ellison, Boardman, William and Issaacson (2001) found that the frequency of prayer is inversely related to well-being and only slightly positively related to distress. Kissman and Maurer (2002) report that people with strong faith regardless of religious persuasion, live longer, experience less anxiety, cope better with stressful life events, have lower blood pressures and stronger immune systems.

Old illiterate women that are spiritually religious have been described by Lewis (2001) as having buffer against depression, a way to maintain meaning at the end of life, a mechanism for preparation for death and dying, increased happiness and life satisfaction and higher levels of adjustment for older adults. Glicker and Fraser (2004) define spirituality as the means by which one finds wholeness, meaning and purpose in life. It arises from an innate longing for fulfillment through the establishment of loving relationships with self and the community. It suggests harmony with self, others and the world.

George et al. (2000) report that religious involvement and spirituality have been shown to reduce the onset of illness; once the illness is present, recovery is faster and longevity is greater than in those who are not involved with religion or spirituality. Going to church regularly and fellowshiping with others help social bonds to develop among people who are religiously affiliated. They have larger social networks, more contact with those social networks, receive more help from others and they are more satisfied with their social support networks.

Cognitive Restructuring: Getting out of loneliness and isolated feeling requires quality and logical thinking. Our thought line is very crucial to having psychological problems. It seems it is easier for educated women to engage in constructive thinking than the illiterate women. It is natural to be disturbed by problems and experience of life, but it is by choice to feel lonely in the midst of problems of life. From the stories narrated above, it was observed that these old women seem to have psychological problems because of their faulty thinking. For instance, the first woman narrated that her uncle told her to leave her husband for another man. She knew it quite alright that her children might likely suffer. She still kept to her uncle's suggestion because of the fear she had for her uncle. Assuming she had the thought that we are responsible for our actions in life, it might have helped her to live a better life. And the feeling of loneliness and isolation would have been minimized.

Conclusion

Old age cannot be avoided; it will come when it would come. Attitude to age is what really matters. Many old illiterate women are fortunate to have at least one child that is educated. Such children should ensure that their mothers are given adequate attention with the understanding that they have suffered for them early in life. Abandoning them in their old age is not a desirable attitude. Providing adequate social and financial support will go a long way in reducing the feeling of loneliness and isolation in old age. If they are well taken care of, they will wait for death with joy rather than seeing death as a way to end their suffering and unpleasant living and situations. Many of such women have experienced death in a painful and gruesome manner. Old peoples home may not be many in this country to cater for them. Individual can endeavour to cater for their old people no matter the challenge.

Recommendations

1. The social life of old illiterate women can be improved if adequate support is given to them by their children, family members and any other social group like the religious society.
2. Adult education can be introduced to help these categories of women to be educated and enlighten. If they can read and write it will help them to read books that will keep their minds busy instead of loneliness and feelings of hopelessness.
3. Children can be encouraged through radio jiggles, messages on social media on the importance of taking care of their parents. The bitter truth is that they too will be old someday.
4. The Local government can put in place measures to help empower large number of such women not only those who are members of political parties.
5. Free medical services should be provided for this set of people especially those that have lost their husband or children.
6. Non-governmental organisations and religious group can also be of help in this case to rescue them from lonely life.

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