Reviewer’s report

Title: Older persons’ existential loneliness, as interpreted by their significant others – an interview study

Version: 0 Date: 24 Mar 2017

Reviewer: Bernadette Dierckx De Casterlé

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for this interesting and clearly written publication. Existential loneliness is indeed a crucial but complex and challenging phenomenon in the care for older persons.

The choice to study this phenomenon using a qualitative research design and from the perspective of the relatives is appropriate. The study reveals interesting insights from the relatives' perspective contributing to a better understanding of the living world of older frail persons. So, this manuscript could be of added value to the existing literature in this area.

However, there are some issues which could be clarified and improved.

Major issues:

* As the authors repeatedly indicated, studies concerning the phenomenon 'existential loneliness' are sparse, resulting in a lack of clear definition of 'existential loneliness'. It is not clearly described in the paper how the researchers addressed this conceptual problem in their research method. How did they introduce and define 'existential loneliness' when interviewing the relatives? How did they relate the relative's experiences to the concept 'existential loneliness'? Did the older frail persons, involved in this study, indeed suffer from 'existential loneliness'? In other words, does this study contribute to a better understanding of older persons' 'existential loneliness' (from the perspective of relatives) or to the impact of age or frailty on the older persons’ well-being (from the perspective of relatives) or ...? In the discussion the authors reported that they 'had to take into consideration that the concept of EL is not clarified and is seen as a multifaceted phenomenon'. It is not clear whether this statement refers to the methodological issue mentioned here. Some clarification about this methodological issue is lacking in the method section as well in the discussion.
Minor issues:

* 'Background section' can be improved by a stronger focus in view of a solid and clear problem statement (the lack of studies about the relatives' experiences is not the most convincing argument to investigate older persons' EL).

* More information about the research 'design' is needed to understand and evaluate the fit between the specific design and research question. Besides, it is not well argued why Hsieh and Shanon's analysis approach is appropriate in view of the research aim.

* More (convincing) information is needed to be able to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings

* Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes; range = 51??? (page 7, line 40)

*Discussion point about "the perception that the older persons' physical impairments lead to EL" (page 16, lines 9-43): the first part of this paragraph is clear and pertinent; the second part is less clear. "With regards to both the experience and the expression of EL, the body is important ‘ (line 21-22). Who is saying this? The relation with Gabriel Marcel isn't clear neither. The authors concluded the paragraph with the message that relatives are a valuable resource in the understanding of the experience of EL (which certainly is true); the relationship with the above addressed discussion point, however, is not clear for the reader.

*The authors repeatedly refer to the complex and multifaceted nature of EL; in order to better understand the concept of EL (which is the aim of this research) it would be interesting to clarify what they exactly mean by 'multifaceted' (as revealed by the findings of their study).
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
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Not relevant to this manuscript

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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