![Utrecht University]

The Power of Connection

u3a's Innovative Activities against Social Isolation in the UK

Sherida ten Lande and Tess Tolsma

Top-left: Participating in Table Tennis at Croydon u3a. Top-right: Talking with members from Croydon u3a's Drawing and Painting. Bottom-left: Participating in Line Dancing at Croydon u3a. Bottom-right: Sherida and group-leader Jacqueline of the Darts and Pub Lunch in Croydon. Photos taken by Croydon u3a members.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to u3a for giving us the opportunity to conduct research with their organisation. Harriet Radermacher and Sam Mauger, thank you for taking us on and also many thanks to the rest of the team for participating in our project.

Words cannot express how grateful we are for every single u3a member who participated in our project. It has been more than an honour to meet so many people, and to see how enthusiastic everyone was to participate in our research.

Many thanks to the members who participated in an one-on-one conversation with us, and also to those whom we met during the activities. Every single one of you has been valuable to our research project, and we personally enjoyed the intergenerational conversations. You made us feel at home and gave us the feeling that we have always been a part of the group.

Thank you for reminding us to dream big and that the world is ours.

Without further ado, we are happy to present to you the conclusion from our thesis, and we hope you enjoy reading it.

Brief Summary

Ten weeks of fieldwork and researching the support offered by u3a in alleviating social isolation, resulted in the publication of our thesis *The Power of Connection: u3a's Innovative Activities against Social Isolation in the UK*. During these ten weeks, we wanted to find out how social isolation is experienced by (semi-) retired people, and how they try to alleviate it through various means, such as with the activities offered by u3a. To get a complete picture, we participated in various online and local activities to 'become' part of u3a, and we spoke to many u3a members as well as staff from the Trust to create a bottom-up understanding of how exactly u3a alleviates social isolation. After ten weeks of participating in the Interest Groups Online and local activities with Croydon u3a, visiting Croydon's GM's, conducting over forty interviews as well as engaging in many casual conversations, we have concluded that u3a members receive support from u3a in alleviating social isolation in several ways.

This document is the conclusion of our thesis, submitted as part of a Bachelors in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Utrecht.

Contact details: shatenlande@outlook.com and tesstolsma3@gmail.com

Conclusion of u3a research

"There's a difference between feeling lonely and alone," Glenys says with a slightly forced smile as she moves her gaze from me down to her cup. I can feel the energy of the conversation shift as we are touching upon a sensitive topic. Yet it is not uncomfortable, as we are drinking a cup of coffee with the MOTO group and these topics are not anything new.[1] From the corner of my eye I see Pat, other Pat and Jenny P. nodding in agreement. They all have lost their partner, a drastic change they can barely put into words. Although they would not be where they are now without the support of their u3a friends, the void will never be filled. And so, Glenys remarks that u3a friends go a long way in helping to not feel alone, but there is a limit to what they can do about loneliness. Companionship goes a long way, but there remains a lingering feeling of loneliness that cannot be filled.

The situation above could be a common experience for u3a members in a nutshell, at least for members on their own. With u3a as a group-based intervention both locally and via Interest Groups Online (IGO), they remedy feelings of social isolation by offering a (new) social network. Our participants came forward with stories about previous feelings of loneliness or isolation, whether it was related to retirement or widowhood, which u3a helped to resolve. But, it does not rule out the possibility of feeling lonely. u3a's activities, the mental and physical benefits, and the social connections are a start, but it is not the perfect remedy. However, it goes a long way.

Therefore, this thesis has sought to answer the question "In what ways do retirees in Croydon experience support in alleviating social isolation through group-based initiatives by u3a?" With the combination of an anthropological lens as well as other scholarly fields, we tried to create a picture as complete as possible. We first explored how our participants give meaning to their wellbeing, and how the u3a group-based activities maintained or improved this. We then analysed how communities within u3a are built and how that provides a sense of belonging. By comparing local to online activities, we discovered that technology can enhance or complicate the effectiveness of u3a's initiatives in alleviating social isolation, depending on personal experiences. Finally, we took a critical stance to identify how the effectiveness of these group-based activities can be further enhanced in the future.

---

[1] Members On Their Own in Croydon on April 11, 2024.

We met our aim to contribute with an anthropological view to current frameworks on social isolation originating from other disciplines, specifically by doing research *with* the elderly rather than *on* the elderly (Lamb 2014; Fry 1980). As a reduction in social isolation causes an effect on wellbeing, we analysed how wellbeing is defined from on-ground experiences (Reitsema and McIlvaine 2014), which combines multiple conceptualisations from other disciplines. This offers a multidisciplinary and comprehensive understanding of wellbeing among and according to the elderly (Alter 1999; Thin 2008). Furthermore, we have contributed to anthropological debates regarding a sense of belonging by focussing in-depth on a specific age group in the UK. These particular findings have confirmed where the emic perspectives aligned with the studies of Dula (2010) about companionship, Lambert et al. (2013) about sense of belonging, Gammeltoft (2018) about sense of belonging, and Verver and Koning (2023) about interconnectedness. Thus, these results have illustrated that the divergence between theory and reality can be considered small, even though member's understanding of the concepts are intertwined. Then, anthropological debates on inclusion were both contributed to and critically analysed, since disabilities are often overlooked in inclusion studies (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013). By particularly paying attention to disabilities, we are contributing to filling this gap. Gender was another prominent factor for inclusion in our fieldwork, and through our on-ground findings we expand the existing frameworks on these topics. Our second aim was to create a positive picture of the third-age, rather than otherwise negative associations in research such as frailty, senility or dependency (Duque 2022, 38). We achieved this by giving our participants a voice and letting them speak about their third age, which illustrates that it can be a phase of new projects, possibilities and without social isolation. The following section, then, illustrates particularly how we contribute to these mentioned debates after which we draw a final conclusion to our main research question.

The transition to retirement was characterised by u3a members as either voluntary or involuntary, with health and social support influencing the outcome of this process. For all, the inevitable process of retirement asked for adjustment to an unknown phase in life. Members confirmed that health status can complicate the process of retirement, yet social support, pre-retirement planning and leisure activities can regulate this (Alpass and Paddison 2013, 13). Feelings of social isolation and loneliness occurred among several members, either prior to or during their u3a membership, whereas others were prevented from such feelings because of u3a.

We started with a threefold categorisation of loneliness: emotional, social and existential. u3a's activities have proven to be effective in targeting emotional loneliness (the

absence of close emotional attachments or meaningful relationships) and social loneliness (the absence of an engaging community or social network) (Dahlberg 2020; Jiménez et al. 2021, 206; Weiss 1973). Social loneliness is remedied by the existence of u3a activities altogether. The activities provide the opportunity to engage with peers, build a community and establish (meaningful) social connections when u3a acquaintances turn into friends. Establishing meaningful connections can be achieved through, e.g. MOTO, therefore targeting emotional loneliness. Silverman, Baroiller and Hemer (2021) argue that various scholars within anthropology say that mourning takes place within communities which implies that the collective can grieve which is something MOTO members can connect over and form meaningful connections.

MOTO members are not only a good example of Silverman, Baroiller and Hemer' (2021) statement, but also for Verver and Konings' (2023) statement about past-present interconnectedness. Herein, members form communities based on immediate comprehension of events, in this case bereavement. Existential loneliness, referring to the disconnection of the elderly to others (Jiménez et al. 2021, 206), is remedied by u3a through the opportunity to connect with other retirees in local or online activities with similar interests to discuss during those activities. In some cases the connection remains as simple as that, while most extend further into the formation of a community or companionship. The selectivity theory was only justified for the last category of interconnectedness and companionship as members consciously chose their companion. The other categories fell out since a group connection meant generally appreciating people, or the connections were too superficial for selections. Thus, the data gathered regarding the social connections within u3a have confirmed the theories of Dula (2010) and Verver and Koning (2023), while slight contradicting the selectivity theory of Fredrickson and Carstensen (1990) as it was only applied to the last category of connections. Overall, the collective experience of members is positive regarding the combat against social isolation based on various experiences of interconnectedness, companionship, and sense of belonging through participation in activities. Despite members not defining social isolation directly, their responses to the question what u3a has brought them showed that they do not feel socially isolated to a certain degree, because they found people within u3a whom they can engage with on the several levels explained above. Thus, u3a partly diminished all categories of loneliness, but also alleviated social isolation as it decreased the absence of relationships with other people (De Jong-Gierveld and Havens 2004, 110).

The complementary nature of our research has allowed us to determine that social support and wellbeing are interconnected with one another. A lack of social support can intensify feelings of isolation, which can then exacerbate the risk of developing depression or anxiety (Alpass and Paddison 2013, 40). u3a activities are a form of problem-focused coping strategies, focussing on improving social relationships (Masi et al. 2011, 223). Through offering new social relationships, a sense of belonging and purpose is provided (Bailey and McLaren 2005; Heaven et al. 2013) in which feelings of happiness can be created (Kavedžija and Walker 2016), and social support can be a buffer in assisting the management of stressors Alpass and Paddison 2013). Our research, then, brings conceptualisations of wellbeing from various scholars closer together. We confirm Alter's (1999) suggestion to move beyond the dualism of mind and body, and see wellbeing as more complex and intertwined. In fact, wellbeing for u3a members is defined through getting (general) physical exercise (Bailey and McLaren 2005), cognitive stimulation (La Rue 2010), being surrounded by a social network, participating in meaningful projects (Fischer 2014), and experiencing happiness or feelings of enjoyment (Alpass and Paddison 2013; Chiang et al. 2013; Kavedžija and Walker 2016). Feelings of joy can also result from physical activity, emphasising the interconnectedness of emotional outcomes and mental wellbeing (Tuominen et al. 2022). Despite increased feelings of social isolation during COVID-19 social distancing measures, this was remedied by u3a's Zoom activities or personal calls. This allowed for social connections and decreasing feelings of stress and anxiety (Rodrigues et al. 2022). Thus, our anthropological approach enabled us to scrutinise the concept of wellbeing from an emic-perspective, contributing to a more encompassing understanding of what wellbeing means to the people experiencing it. This was achieved by doing research *with* older people (Fry 1980) which other anthropologists have not always done. u3a's social contacts and activities help to reduce social isolation and members' wellbeing is subsequently affected as feelings of happiness are created in connections to others, and (general) physical exercise and participation in itself bring joy. These are important pillars for wellbeing according to u3a members. This illustrates that when social isolation is alleviated through group-based interventions, wellbeing can also be improved.

We also concluded that social isolation can be further alleviated by paying more attention to inclusion regarding gender, race and disabilities. This allows for reaching more people that could potentially feel socially isolated. Staff and u3a members mostly identify the same setbacks, which is also in line with research on the University of the Third Age in Poland. They all state that inclusion requires attention, to move beyond the elite membership profile of white, middle-class. This can contribute to the battle against social isolation, as well as

including younger demographics to prevent age-segregation and battle social isolation altogether (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020; Robbins-Ruszkowski 2013; Viduani et al. 2021). However, u3a members recognising other setbacks implies that the Trust does not have a full understanding of the on-ground experience. For anthropological research, this implies that spending pro-longed time with participants allows for a deeper understanding and to tackle an issue from the bottom-up. In this case, we could identify how social isolation could be further reduced according to those experiencing it. As a result, members argue for inclusion in course content, and attention to the scarcity of men in addition to the other commonly defined setbacks.

Members argue that the content of activities should have stricter guidelines as members have quit because of racist or sexist lectures. Even if groups are white, diversity can be ensured through the activities on offer. Then with regards to men, the disparity in participation rates should change. Learned attitudes and behaviour and traditional masculine norms, e.g. toughness and resilience, can refrain men from seeking help (Kelly et al. 2021; Addis and Mahalik 2003; Seidler et al. 2016). Encouragement from a community which they are part of, can make them more likely to seek help (Addis and Mahalik 2003, 11). u3a can remedy this, as its social connections can foster a sense of belonging and therefore assist in getting men out of social isolation. Bearing in mind the alleviation of social isolation, the Third Age Trust can more actively encourage local u3a's to be aware of inclusion of ethnicities, disabilities, or gender, and act upon the needs in their local u3a.

In conclusion, this research has tried to answer the research question: "In what ways do retirees in Croydon experience support in alleviating social isolation through group-based initiatives by u3a?" As we have seen, u3a members in Croydon and online, receive support from u3a in alleviating social isolation in several ways. Primarily, alleviating social isolation is achieved through the group-based nature of u3a's interventions which provides social connections. Members identify the social contacts with u3a members and belonging in that community as determinants to alleviate social isolation. Some members felt isolated or lonely prior to joining u3a, and these feelings were eliminated or reduced. The latter indicates that some form of loneliness is still present, since there is a difference between being lonely and alone. As u3a's community and members remedy being alone and mitigate feelings of loneliness, there are more benefits flowing from this. A second way of support is revealed here, which is that u3a activities also assist in members' wellbeing and overall quality of life (Reitsema and McIlvaine 2014). With participating in u3a activities, the social contacts alleviate social isolation and the participation itself gives structure to retired life, enabling

general or physical exercise, providing cognitive stimulation, and it fosters feelings of enjoyment and happiness either through the contacts or activities (Alpass and Paddison 2013; Bailey and McLaren 2005; Chiang et al. 2013; Kavedžija and Walker 2016; La Rue 2010).

Then, the last specific way in which u3a offers support in the alleviation of social isolation, is through the Interest Groups Online. This online platform allows members to participate who are e.g. housebound, or combine u3a activities with other responsibilities. As they cannot attend locally, they are still included in u3a's reach and those members confirmed this online tool to be a mitigator for decreased or eradicated feelings of social isolation.

The battle against social isolation is an ongoing one. For those included in the scope of u3a, it has been effective in reducing social isolation and subsequent benefits resulting in structure to retired life, wellbeing and overall life satisfaction. Given its effectiveness to alleviate social isolation according to our participants, they urge u3a to expand to other nations to improve other people's quality of life as well, as a result of these various benefits.