Everyday life and the new shapes of identities – The different meanings of 'things that did not happen' in the lives of Finnish older persons during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our lives in many ways since the end of 2019. This paper investigates the everyday lives of Finnish older persons during the first three months of the pandemic when they were required to stay in "quarantine-like conditions." The study utilises the 'sociology of nothing' in exploring the meanings of nothingness in the everyday lives of older people; that is, the things, events and people that were absent from their lives because of the pandemic. The main interest of the article is to reverse the typical analytical focus from 'things that happened' to 'things that did not happen' and to shed light on the experiences and descriptions of older persons' unlived lives. The article presents empirical findings from written letters collected between April and June 2020 from persons aged 70 or over ($n = 77$). The letters were analysed with theory-driven content analysis. The paper suggests that the unlived life; that is, not having, not being and not doing, generated feelings of otherness from the social world, but also freedom from obligations. Furthermore, the present article gives a sense of how old age is depicted in Finnish society and by the older persons themselves.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a part of our everyday life since the end of 2019. The pandemic has impacted our lives in a myriad of ways, changing how we work, go to school, enjoy our free-time and interact with each other. Research on COVID-19 has been substantial in almost every field of study, and our understanding of the virus itself and its effects on the everyday lives of people worldwide is growing constantly. People over 70 years of age have especially been the target of research interest as, from the very beginning of the pandemic, they were regarded as being at higher risk of serious coronavirus infection compared to other age groups. In Finland, this led to the recommendation that all persons aged 70 and over should avoid meeting up with other people. Interestingly, this recommendation, made by the Government of Finland in March 2020, was formulated so that it was interpreted as an obligation, which in turn caused confusion about the scope of the restrictions. As a result, many older persons were in fact self-isolated without knowing when they would be "free" again.

This article explores the changes in everyday lives of older persons in Finland during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing written letters collected between April and June 2020. The media coverage of self-isolation and its effect on older people and their loved ones has tackled issues such as increased feelings of loneliness, isolation and other problems, like inactivity and alcohol abuse. Yet, so far, not much research has concentrated on older persons and their own views on self-isolation in Finland (see, however, Aaltonen, Pulkki, Teräväinen, & Forma, 2021; Ahosola, Tuominen, Tiainen, Jylhä, & Jolanki, 2021; Kehusmaa, Siltanen, & Leppäaho, 2021; Pirhonen, Blomqvist, Harju, Laakkonen, & Lemivaara, 2020; Tiilikainen et al., 2021) or internationally (see Brooke & Clark, 2020; Chemen & Gopalla, 2021; Heid, Cartwright, Wilson-Genderson, & Pruchno, 2021). For instance, how did older persons themselves perceive these guidelines? Did they follow, ignore, or take them too seriously? What changed in their lives, if anything?

The present article gets its inspiration from the work of Susie Scott (2017) whose 'sociology of nothing' provides an interesting theoretical framework for analysing the experiences of older people during the pandemic. Nothingness is an important field of study, as it reveals *something* that is normally regarded as an empty space surrounding things that are marked and noticed (Scott, 2017). For instance, if we

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think about 'safe distancing' or 'social distancing', the actual meaning of the two words is in fact represented in the two-meter empty space between two persons, and in that way, nothingness becomes something meaningful – *very meaningful* in this case – and part of social interaction. In addition, the often-neglected background of the marked things is an interesting field of study, especially during these times of global crisis; suddenly, routines that were seen but not noticed break and change into something new, something that might be empty or absent, but is still visible in our thoughts (Scott, 2017) and hopes. Hence, absence is present, visible in the empty spaces.

The main interest of the article is to reverse the typical analytical focus from 'things that happened' to 'things that did not happen' – to shed light on the background of events, and particularly on the experiences of absence and emptiness of older persons' lives during quarantine. I am interested in the descriptions of absent people, events that were cancelled, silent backgrounds, and the processes of dis-identification and disengagement that 'happened' during the self-isolation period. More precisely, I ask 1) How do the writers describe the contents, which are missing from their lives, and 2) What kinds of meaning do these expressions of nothingness have for older persons?

The article contributes to growing research on COVID-19 and older persons, but it also discusses a theoretical framework that has so far been neglected in studies on ageing and everyday life. I argue that mundane things that were previously unmarked have become marked during the COVID-19 crisis and that they reveal something important about our social imagery of old age and the roles ascribed to older persons. Thus, the present article gives a sense of how old age is depicted by the older persons themselves and in Finnish society in general. Overall, it is important to examine the effects of social distance and forms of absence on older people's lives to gain a better understanding of experiences of the pandemic. This article shows how meaningful social *no-things*, that is, e.g. absence and emptiness, can be and why they are worth studying.

Older persons and the pandemic in Finland

On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic. Shortly after this, the Government of Finland declared a state of emergency. Different kinds of measures were taken according to the Communicable Diseases Act, and two decrees concerning the use of powers under the Emergency Powers Act were submitted by the Government. At that time, emerging medical data suggested that older people were at a particularly high risk of developing serious complications from the illness. For this reason, the Government of Finland, like many other across the globe, decided to recommend that persons aged 70 or more "are obliged to refrain from contact with other persons" and should stay "in quarantine-like conditions" (Government of Finland, 2020). Although this was, from the legal point-of-view, *a recommendation*, it was in fact formulated as *an obligation*, which caused uncertainty and confusion about the scope of these restrictions for older Finnish people. For instance, going outdoors or grocery shopping were simultaneously interpreted as allowed and strictly prohibited, because in the recommendation, "the Government requests people over 70 to avoid close contact and movement outside their homes. If it is essential to go in person to a shop, pharmacy or health station or to do other business, the advice is to do this at times when there are few other customers around" (Government of Finland, 2020).

The recommendation of self-isolation affected more than 870,000 persons, which is over 15% of the total Finnish population. In the first phase, most of the infections were concentrated in the capital region (Uusimaa) and for that reason, the region was isolated from the rest of the country from 27th March to 15th April (Forma, Aaltonen, & Pulkki, 2020). The recommendation of self-isolation was lifted on the 20th of May 2020, but some age-specific restrictions remained. For instance, as older persons were still a high-risk group, visiting them was not recommended; instead, people had to maintain contact remotely (i.e., by

phone) or meet outside, with a two-meter distance and without any physical contact such as hugging or shaking hands. In addition, visits to nursing homes were prohibited, although in the case of palliative care, the visits were permitted if carried out safely (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM), 2020). In June, all age-specific recommendations were removed and from that point onwards, every restriction or recommendation concerned mainly the whole population over age 16 (YLE (The Finnish Broadcasting Company), 2020).

Compared to other European countries, Finland has been relatively successful in restricting the spread of the coronavirus, with the total number of infections being over 810,000 and the crude cumulative incidence per 100,000 inhabitants being 14,696 (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; World Health Organisation, WHO, 2021). The government's hybrid strategy has focused on testing, tracing, isolating and treating (Forma et al., 2020). However, the majority of COVID-19 related deaths have occurred among people over age 70. By June 2020, the number of deaths was 323, of which 84.9% were over 70 years of age (Forma et al., 2020). As of today (22.3.2022), the number of deaths has risen to 2881, of which 84% were over 70 years of age (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). In addition, the virus has spread to many care homes and long-term care facilities across the country.

According to the national survey on customer satisfaction in home care and long-term care conducted by the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, feelings of loneliness have increased during the pandemic both among people receiving home care services as well as people living in long-term care facilities. About 20% of the respondents had not been outdoors at all during the pandemic (Kehusmaa et al., 2021). Similar results were found in a recent survey on people aged 60 and over: 57% of the respondents reported that due to COVID-19, their mobility outside home had decreased, 55% had fewer hobbies than before the pandemic and 49% had less contact with other people, both face-to-face and by phone or other devices (60+ Barometer, 2021). However, a recent study on the meaningfulness of life suggests that many older people in Finland maintained a sense of purpose and enjoyment in their lives through small things such as observing the changing seasons or staying in their summer cottages (Tiilikainen et al., 2021).

In addition, the majority of respondents in the national survey on customer satisfaction saw the restriction measures as necessary given the circumstances of the pandemic (Kehusmaa et al., 2021). This finding is in line with the international comparative study in which Finnish respondents had the most trust in medical care and the government, and felt that the response of the national government to the coronavirus crisis was appropriate (Georgieva et al., 2021). This partly explains the national context in which the recommendation of self-isolation was interpreted as an obligation and why it was taken seriously.

Everyday life – meanings of things that are and things that are not

Sociology of the ordinary, everyday life has been theorised substantially in classical works of Elias (2000 [1939]), Goffman (1959) and Lefebvre (2003), to name just a few. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman (2013) traced the history of research on everyday life in her review article and suggested that everyday life has been seen as a performance of daily routines (Goffman, 1959), a social structure of rules (Elias, 2000 [1939]), and positions guided by habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). In the present article, I take a symbolic interactionalist standpoint and discuss the everyday life from the point-of-view of social interactions. The premise is that the writers who participated in this study actively narrate their understanding of the social world and in that sense interact with other people and society. I am interested in what kinds of meanings and interpretations are attached to these interactions, and what kinds of roles people adopt when trying to make sense of the social world surrounding them, especially in times of sudden change. As stated earlier, the

intention of this article is to reverse the usual starting point from 'things that happened' to 'things that did not happen', and utilise Susie Scott's (2017) sociology of nothing in analysing older persons lives during the first months of the pandemic.

At the very core of the sociology of nothing is the idea that *no-things* can also carry meaning to people and are thus worth studying. However, not all absent or missing things are meaningful. Following the distinction made by Green (2011), Scott (2020) argues that 'nothingness' means the absence of something specific, while 'nothing' means the total absence of everything. Thus, the sociological interest of nothingness is not in the infinite quantity of things that *are not* – instead, the purpose is to analyse, for instance, the negative social spaces and phenomena of which a person is aware and that carry meaning for them, such as lost opportunities, unborn children, or unformed relationships. Therefore, absence is the *absence of something or someone*, an empty space or a void in our daily lives. In the case of the pandemic, many were unable to participate in or arrange different events typically a part of the life course, such as christening ceremonies, weddings or even funerals. What is special in the context of the pandemic is the fact that it is an external force to which we all have to react, both collectively and individually. All forms of nothingness described in this article are thus, at least partly, creations of the pandemic, but the people are the ones who lack, miss, do not have and are not.

To Scott, nothingness is something that needs to be done or accomplished. Scott (2017) argues that 'active' and 'passive' acts can be analytically separated into acts of commission and acts of omission. A demonstrative act of commission happens when we actively and consciously avoid doing or being something, and passive acts of omission happen when we fail to act or, in other words, we do not do something. According to Scott (2017), both an act of commission and an act of omission are demonstrations of agency: 'Choosing not to do something, disengaging from a group or finding nothing to relate to in a dominant cultural script, can all be considered demonstrations of individual agency, suggesting a critically distant interpretation of one's situation' (p. 4). Furthermore, 'doing nothing' and 'not doing something' are both acts, demonstrations of agency, and elements of social interaction.

Scott (2017) distinguishes four dimensions of nothingness, namely: 1) non-identity, 2) inactivity and inertia, 3) absence, invisibility and emptiness and 4) silence and quietness. In the present article, I concentrate on the first three dimensions, which represent the negative aspects of *being*, *doing* and *having*. Silence and quietness tackle the issues of spoken language, which in the light of the present article's dataset is difficult to analyse and is therefore beyond the scope of this article.

All dimensions of nothingness include acts of commission and acts of omission. The first dimension, *non-identity*, includes acts of commission such as dis-identification (*not being like*, e.g., social identity), ex-identity (*no longer being*, e.g., ex-alcoholic), and never-identity (*has never been or done*, e.g., voluntary childlessness). Non-identities can also happen through acts of omission in which the potential line of, for instance, social identity never means enough for an individual to be recognised or consciously rejected as identification. These non-identities remain un-marked, especially if they represent the normative majority (e.g., heterosexuals, child-bearing women) (Scott, 2017).

The second dimension, *inactivity and inertia*, includes decisions not to (*doing nothing*) and non-decisions (*non-doing*). In the first case, the actor makes a conscious decision not to do something, for instance, not to vote, which as an act can also have great personal significance for the actor's self-identity. A non-decision can occur when the actor unintentionally does not act. For instance, a person may remain childless not because of active rejection of parenthood, but because of their circumstances (Scott, 2017). In the present article, I explore the 'decisions not to' as a form of disengagement and as an active performance of individual agency. It is important to note that these non-doings also entail potential for new lines of action: doing something else instead can generate events that would not have been possible without the non-

doing (Scott, 2017).

In addition to not being and not doing, not having is also a form of nothingness. Therefore, the third dimension of nothingness analysed in this article is *absence, invisibility* and *emptiness*. Here again, the absence, or lack, invisibility or emptiness, is twofold: things that were but are now absent, and things that have never existed but can be imagined. In both cases, the absent thing is present, either in the negative space in which it used to be (e.g., a bald head and hair loss) or in our memories or purely in our imagination (e.g., fear of nothingness in darkness) (Scott, 2017).

In this article, I am mostly interested in acts of commission, specifically the descriptions of not having, not being and not doing. Furthermore, I analyse the meanings and interpretations given to different forms of nothingness such as absent people, events that were cancelled, silent backgrounds, and the processes of dis-identification and disengagement that 'happened' when the pandemic broke the routines of everyday living.

Data and method

The dataset of this article consists of written letters from Finnish people aged 70 or over. In the call for written letters, the writers were encouraged to write freely on their situation or ponder changes in their living environment, homes, received services, and day-to-day life. They were specifically asked how they had perceived the guidelines of the Government of Finland to stay in quarantine-like conditions. In addition, the writers were asked to give their age, gender, place of living, with whom they lived and to specify their family relations. I made the call as open as possible to minimise the risk that the potential writers would see it as a structured questionnaire, thus avoiding the possibility for short answers to every single question. The writers were asked to give their name and contact information only if they were willing to be contacted later for an interview, but otherwise, they could write anonymously. The writers had three different ways of sending the letters: by regular mail, by secured e-mail, or anonymously using the Webropol survey tool. The data collection followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019). Thus, the informed consent was obtained by providing information on a website about issues including data protection, the use of personal data, the rights of participants and the purpose of the whole study. The privacy and data protection policy was also available as simplified text.

The call was open from early April to the end of June 2020 and was primarily shared on social media, particularly Facebook. The decision was made to share the call mainly on social media because of the relatively high number of social media users in Finland. According to Statistics Finland (2020a), in 2020, 69% of persons aged 16–89 used social media, the most popular social networking site being Facebook. Of people aged 65 to 74 years, over 300,000 persons were using social media, which is 46% of the share of persons aged 65–74 years; in the oldest group, that is, people aged 75 to 89 years, the proportion was over 75,000 users (16% of the total share of persons aged from 75 to 89 years). In an effort to be inclusive of people who do not use social media or the Internet, I also made a bulletin, that was published in four regional newspapers, which broadened the number of potential participants. I shared the call on my own Facebook page and on various regional Facebook pages of the largest cities in Finland. I also contacted people who were administering an age-specific Facebook page called 'People born in the 40s', and they shared the call there. I also shared the call on LinkedIn and Twitter. Although the primary recruitment strategy was to reach participants via social media channels, which limits the number and variety of potential participants, in total 13 participants wrote in their letters that they had either seen the newspaper article for the call or were informed of it by their relatives or friends. Thus, among the participants, there are also those who did not use social media at all.

In total, I received 77 letters (41 by e-mail, 20 by mail, and 16 by

Webropol). Out of those writers who gave their age ($n = 66$), the youngest writers were 70 and the oldest 93 years of age, the median age being 73 and average age being 75.7. As the median age suggests, most of the writers were in their 70s, but in total 13 writers were over 80 years old and three writers over 90 years old. Almost 75% of the writers who gave information on their gender ($n = 72$) were women and about 25% were men. About 60% were living with a spouse and 40% were living alone. Most of the letters came from Southern Finland, Central Finland, Northern Finland and Lapland. The most typical length of a letter was about one and half pages, but the length also varied a lot: the shortest letters were just a few lines and the longest was 69 pages (the whole dataset was 300 Word pages in total). The topics varied from feelings (anxiety, worry, happiness, fear) to hobbies, leisure, trust, unfairness, use of technology, family members, visits, holidays, the importance of nature, food, alcohol, and to larger societal themes such as the labour market and climate change.

As a method of analysis, I used theory-driven content analysis. After reading the entire dataset, the main steps of the analysis were coding and theming, both of which were directed by Scott's (2017) work on the sociology of nothing, especially the notions of non-identities, inactivity, invisibility, absence and emptiness. As stated earlier, the premise was that the writers narrate their understanding of the social world in the letters and give meaning to different interactions with others. Using the Atlas.ti™ software, the coding process started with the descriptions of empty calendars, boredom, social distance, absent people, loneliness, proximity and non-participation, and progressed to more latent comments on not-doing and not-being such as not wanting to obey the restrictions, not seeing oneself as an old person or fearing losing one's place in the social world, resulting in 42 pages (single-spaced, 11 font) of data. Finally, these descriptions of nothingness were divided into three thematic categories: not having, not being and not doing.

Findings

The first category, *not having*, describes empty spaces, the invisible virus and not having social contact with other people. The second category, *not being*, includes descriptions of dis-identification, and the third category, *not doing*, contains descriptions of disengagement, inactivity and freedom from obligations. Below, I first explore the accounts of not having and the age-specific restrictions caused by the pandemic. After that, I report on the effects of the restrictions to the participants' self-identity as not being by using the notion of dis-identification. Lastly, I show how disengagement and inactivity as a form of not doing can also generate freedom.

Not having – emptiness, invisibility and absence

As Scott (2017) writes, negative spaces are meaningful because of their emptiness, as are the things that are noticed to be missing from that space. The following excerpt from one of the letters exemplifies how previously unmarked social space became marked during the pandemic because of its emptiness:

> Where are the children? The nearby school yard is deserted in the mornings. Silent. Lifeless. The playground misses the children. Where are the little pre-schoolers, yellow-vested schoolchildren? There are no cheerful voices – even the school's clock is on distant learning. (Female, 72 years old).

Similarly, during the first three weeks of the pandemic, the invisible virus became 'visible' in many supermarkets around Finland as people were emptying dry food and toilet paper shelves. Empty shelves were widely discussed in the media – they were analysed as signs of sense of self-preservation, guided by primitive survivor instincts and fear of the unknown. Empty shelves caused worry also among people who participated in the call for written letters:

> We were astonished when we saw on Internet that all shelves in Prisma [a supermarket] were empty. What is this, what is going to happen? (Female, 73 years old).

In addition to marked emptiness of the shelves, the invisibility of the virus was described as an embodied experience and as a memory:

> I turned 80 yesterday. To my mind I'm 50, but what can you do about your age or corona. They both try to attack me like a crazy cow defending its calf. Corona has behaved meanly towards me. I have never seen it nor met it but still it torments me like a bloodthirsty hound. It's strange, a non-existent toe cannot feel cold - but it still does. (Male, 80 years old).

> Now all news are about corona. Of course I need to believe that this invisible enemy is dangerous and lurks everywhere, on your friend's jacket collar, on a door handle, everywhere where two or three [people] meet. (Female, 76 years old).

> Before I start to talk about my days in quarantine, this spring was like déjà vu to me from the April of 1986 when the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened. At that time too the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and no-one could see if there was radiation in the air or not. This April was similar. (Male, 71 years old).

Thus, both the invisibility of the virus and the emptiness of the normally abundant supermarket shelves highlight the power of nothingness in generating astonishment, fear and feeling of torment, as well as evoking distant memories of fear. Scott (2017) describes emptiness and invisibility as scenes of nothingness, which have the potential of being reimagined as scenes of dramatic events, inhabited by the lurking threat of the unknown and invisible virus. The invisibility was also reminiscent of an event from the 1980s, when nobody could see the radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster in the air.

Music (2020) has argued that the virus gave rise to an epidemic of fear, and "fear of the other", which involves judgements about how others behave. In my study, however, the writers rarely commented on the other people's behaviour in a judgemental way. Rather, they themselves were targets of the objectifying gaze of frailty (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014) and in that way, were excluded from the social world of other people. As described below, they were not treated as invisible persons, but as noticed and, thus, marked as ones 'to be avoided':

> During my walks, I have come to notice that people are avoiding me more than a few weeks ago. People coming towards me go further around me, don't look at me and pass me by silently, like cautiously? (Female, 93 years old).

> Some are so frightened that they go around me when they come towards me. There's no-one to talk to. Everyone is afraid. And it's no wonder since the Government is almost every day standing [in TV] and telling people what to do and what not. (Male, 84 years old).

> What happens when social contacts are really being restricted? For how long can a human mind bear with these exceptional circumstances? If already after five weeks, I want to go to the riverside and swear out loud? The hardest thing for a human mind is when a human is left outside of social interaction. (Female, 73 years old).

Keeping a safe distance meant that older persons became objects of avoidance, and furthermore, it transformed them from active participators to more passive observers of the social life around them. As an 84-year-old man describes above, he 'sees people' but does not have any contact with them, and in that sense is present but still absent. The aforementioned examples of avoidance can be interpreted as an increase of actual social distance between people - being noticed, but not looked at, caused feelings of social exclusion, which can evolve into a feeling of otherness and a feeling of not having meaning in other people's eyes.

In addition to social distances, the restriction measures meant that most of the organised hobbies, leisure activities and cultural events were cancelled, restaurants were closed and public services, such as libraries, were open only for short visits. Most of the writers described how their calendars suddenly emptied, how their leisure activities such as dancing lessons, arts and craft courses, booked travels and all activities in non-profit organisations were cancelled. For many, the restrictions meant that life was put on hold. As one 74-year-old woman described it, "my own world is at a standstill and gets more silent everyday". The absence of other people was even more intensely experienced during the national holidays. Here a writer describes the realm of lost experiences (Scott, 2020):

> During this time in quarantine, there have been Easter, the first of May, Mother's Day – all days of celebration, which you typically spend with your family. Usually at Easter, I participate in the events organised by the parish. All by myself at home, even though it's a day of celebration – melancholia increases… Tearfulness occupies my mind easier than before. I don't have much life ahead of me and I have to spend it in loneliness. (Female, 78 years old).

In the excerpt above, the writer emotionally reflects on the Easter holidays during which she usually goes to church. Here she describes events that *did not happen* and people that *did not visit* because of the pandemic – she feels lonely and melancholic because she imagines the day of celebration with her close ones and the community in the parish. This need for physical social contact was present in many letters: people longed for their children, grandchildren, other relatives and friends. Seifert, Cotten, and Xie (2021) have argued that the pandemic has caused a double burden of exclusion for older adults, in the forms of both digital and social exclusion. As people can be physically absent, they can also be digitally absent, that is, tele-absent (Friesen, 2014). In the next two excerpts, the writers describe the importance of physical encounters which cannot be replaced by technology:

> 'Distant meeting' or 'remote technology' are impossibilities. En-counters can happen only physically. You don't 'meet' people on a telephone. (Female, 78 years old).

> I haven't seen my children's families nor my spouse at all. I have only an old-fashioned cell phone. My children and their families live far away, so I haven't been able to visit them. Also, the care home [of her spouse] is 90 km away from me, so I haven't travelled there just to wave through the windows. (Female, 72 years old).

Not being: Dis-identification

Social identities are shaped as much by what they are as by what they are not (Skeggs, 2004). The same relationality is visible in the accounts of those writers who actively dis-identify or passively do not identify themselves as being 'old'. As Scott (2020) writes, when an act of dis-identification is performed by the self, the underlying motives of it can be resistance, avoidance, refusal or rebellion. In the letters, the rejection of being old extends to rebellion against the restrictions and being labelled – or even stigmatised (Goffman, 1986 [1963]) – as an old person. Brooke and Clark (2020) noticed in their study that older persons' coping plans during COVID-19 were actually influenced by their need to challenge societal assumptions of older people. In the data used for this article, resistance and active self-protection from the role of a frail old person was significant for many writers – one fifth of all participants described in length their anger or astonishment towards the age-related restrictions.

> The way the quarantine restriction was communicated to us made me angry, it was so double-faced and insulting. Only the protection of older people was emphasised and everything else was left aside.

> We [older persons] are treated like we are all senile. (Female, 73 years old).

> Every now and then, when I go for a well-planned small errand (post office, Alko [liquor store], wool shop) I feel like I'm a convict who has been released from an open prison. One can see my "ankle monitor" from my face. The age of 70 has become stigmatised. (Female, 74 years old).

To be labelled as an old person was experienced as a step from the active third age to the frailty of the fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014). A 71-year-old woman described this rejection and dis-identification vividly:

> Immediately it was plain to me that it's not sensible to ask for help for grocery shopping as I have been [sic] a healthy, active, capable, participative and minding-my-own-business kind of 71-year-old-woman. We were proud of ourselves as we were so youthful and able. We used to say that '70 is the new 50'. So many of us are in such good condition. We took it as a compliment when someone praised our youthful appearance. It's a big leap from this image to being 70 years old in need of protection. Are we now pushed into the group of sheltered old people? No, I won't accept that me or my decisions are being doubted, questioned, let alone belittled. (Female, 71 years old).

As Gilleard and Higgs (2010, 122) write, when people become third persons in others' age-based discourse, that is, when they are referred to only as 'old people' or 'the elderly', they become subjects of a fourth age and in that way, lose their individual agency and self-identity. It is similar to the notion of social death, which is a state in which a person is no longer an active individual in other people's social world (Caswell & O'Connor, 2015; Mulkay & Ernst, 1991). To identify oneself as a youthful, active and capable person also reveals the often unmarked (Scott, 2017) connotations linked to the opposite identity: being old entails socially devalued characteristics such as not being able to manage, not being capable and not being able to decide for themselves anymore. Thus, being non-something (Scott, 2017), in this case 'youthful' instead of 'old', was meaningful for the writer above, giving her the ability to choose how to react to the Government's recommendation.

For some of the writers, however, the quarantine caused fear of nothingness, fear of slipping into the 'black hole' of oldness (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010), a loss of their social identity (Králová, 2015) and eventually, death. The following accounts signal fear towards getting old, to be seen as someone who cannot cope anymore, as a *non-person* (Goffman, 1959).

> It was widely reported in the media who belonged to the quarantine group and I got irritated at first. Was I really 'a frail elderly person in need of protection'? Before this, I didn't consider myself as an old person in a negative way. I didn't even think about my age. Now I notice that I count 'the years I might have left' – there can be a few! To me, this time in quarantine has been a reminder of my mortality. It has caused worry, melancholy, even hopelessness. (Female, 78 years old).

> Suddenly I realised that this [pandemic and restrictions] could go on for a long time, really long time, especially in our case [since they were over 70]. I felt desperate and sad. I was crying when I talked about this to my spouse. I was thinking that we may only have a couple of years during which we would still be able to travel, do different things and be capable. Now it may be so that we'll live like very old people, only indoors. And when this someday ends, we are too old, and life has passed by. You age early. (Female, 71 years old).

Instead of being angry, I'm now apathetic and hopeless. This quarantine is the last restriction that will be dissolved, not in my lifetime. I will die of loneliness and uselessness before that. (Female, 73 years old).

As the quotes above suggest, the strongest dis-identification of being old was among those writers who were in their 70s, or third age. For them the restrictions brought out previously unmarked, and unthinkable, characteristics such as not being capable to decide for themselves anymore. Not-being something thus became meaningful either in the form of active dis-identification, particularly in not accepting the attributes they associated with "old people in need of protection", or in the form of realising their own mortality. In Scott's terms, the unmarked became marked when 70 was suddenly the dividing line of being capable and not-being capable. The line was even more meaningful as it was determined by the society, which further intensified the feeling of being old, and not meaningful, in other people's eyes.

Thus, to be regarded as frail and in need of protection was hard for many writers, although many of them also understood why the restrictions were needed and were grateful for them. However, it is important to note that since the restrictions in Finland concerned almost 900,000 people, obviously the personal and social circumstances, individual capabilities, state of health and wealth status varied greatly. As the life expectancy in Finland is 84.5 years for women and 79.2 for men (Statistics Finland, 2020b), some writers had at least one of their parents still alive and for that reason, they did not see themselves as 'old' at all. In Scott's (2017) terms, oldness was a passive non-identity for them: their age did not mean enough for them for it to become a part of self-identity or to generate the need of dis-identification.

One time we went to see my mother in her care home, saw her through the window. We had masks and gloves of course, and another time, in June, [we saw her] outside from the other side of a table. The saddest thing has been that the old people have been forced to be in self-isolation. On the other hand, it's understandable. (Female, 72 years old and Male, 71 years old).

Not doing: disengagement, inactivity and freedom

Close to dis-identification is the notion of disengagement, which can be defined as distancing oneself from a certain role. The disengagement theory of Cumming and Henry (1961) has been widely discussed, and criticised, in social gerontology as its standpoint is in the assumption of decline as a normal and expected feature of ageing, which leads to withdrawal from social obligations (Hochschild, 1975; Johnson & Mutchler, 2014). This does not take into account the individual differences; instead, it in fact continues the story of the stereotypical view of older persons as a homogenous group depicted by their assumed dependency and vulnerability. This may lead to overprotection of older persons, which in turn may prevent their full participation in society and even discriminate against them (Lumme-Sandt, Nikander, Pietilä, & Vakimo, 2020). For that reason, in this article, disengagement is understood more as an active performance, as resistance or as a demonstration of individual agency rather than as a deterministic process of declining and slipping into non-participation. Here again, the negative aspect of doing or disengagement, is as important as its positive counterpart, making it an active decision not to do something (Scott, 2017).

In the data, resistance against the restrictions was very important to some of the writers. In the next excerpt, a 71-year-old woman sees grocery shopping as a manifestation of her humanity and self-determination:

We decided that we are going to do the grocery shopping by ourselves during the off-peak hours, keeping in mind safety issues and social distancing. To be able to do your own grocery shopping and decide what to buy was a deep manifestation of humanity, preserving human rights and self-determination. One has to be able to

decide what to eat today or next week.–It's a question of where one draws one's life force from. You draw it from your own subjectivity. (Female, 71 years old).

Scott (2017) describes these kinds of decisions as having great personal significance; a decision not to follow the restrictions may go publicly unnoticed but is personally important, even an act of faithfulness to the writer's "true self". Scott (2017) continues, however, that we can study both the actions people do not do and their social consequences. Out of all seventy-seven participants, seven of them talked about guilt they were feeling when they "did not obey" the restrictions. Here is quote from one of them:

When I went outside for the first time since the quarantine started, I felt the curtains swing in the windows and heard blaming in my head – "there's that old lady going without permission". I felt guilty? When the grocery delivery service became jammed, I left the possibility to use it for others. I decided to drive to the supermarket once a week even though I felt guilty every time. (Female, 74 years old).

Why did she feel guilty? Again, there is a high level of trust in institutions in Finland, which also arguably explains why almost all of the writers regarded themselves as quarantined, even though officially they were not. By choosing not to follow the guidelines of the Government of Finland, that is, not to do what is socially expected in Finland, the writers felt "marked" in other people's eyes – and especially in their own eyes.

As stated, most of the writers described themselves as staying in quarantine and following the rules of the Government of Finland. The writers who were in their 80s or 90s (16 in total) particularly described more often that the virus had not changed their everyday life that much. On the one hand, some of them had already been staying mostly in their homes because of their own illnesses; on the other hand, their life was simply so concentrated on the home environment already that the restrictions had no major effect on their everyday life. For some of the writers, the period of self-isolation actually meant that they could be at ease – as they were quarantined, they had permission to *not do* anything (Scott, 2017).

Corona pandemic has kept me detained in my home over a month already. I feel that my 'prison' is very safe. I have full independency to think, act and develop the current peculiar life of mine. (Female, 82 years old).

The writer feels that she is both safe and capable of thinking freely even though she describes her home as a prison. She did not feel that she needed to rebel against the restrictions - rather, she felt safety in her home but also full agency in deciding what to do in her home and mind. The next excerpt shows a slightly different kind of freedom and agency, namely the freedom from the obligation of doing something:

Corona freed me from all kinds of communal work, and I realised that I'm the one who decides, if I want to continue that kind of work in the future. It was a fabulous feeling to say to yourself that at your age, you don't have to do anything that you don't like. The biggest cause of joy in this corona spring has indeed been that I was able to free myself from duties. Since then, I have been sleeping better and have gained enormous amounts of energy. For the first time in my life, I can do the things I like without a bad conscience or the need to explain anything. Incredible feeling!–In addition, I dropped out from Facebook. I haven't missed that. (Female, 70 years old).

Interestingly, not having the freedom to participate in social life due to the pandemic actually enabled the writer above to regain the power to make decisions. She was able to free herself from duties without explaining or giving socially acceptable excuses for not participating. Thus, inactivity (Scott, 2017) triggered an alternative course of action in her life, turning the seemingly negative action into something positive. She also mentions that she dropped out from Facebook, which is also a

form of disengagement. Similarly, here, another writer describes the need to reduce the amount of COVID-19 related news:

> When there was always something new to be told about the subject [the coronavirus] in the media, I decided to watch less those programmes in which the subject was discussed and, in that way, protect myself from anxiety. (Female, [age not stated]).

One writer, a 79-year-old man, wrote that he was not able to visit his children, since he could not use the train because of the restrictions. So, he decided to buy a caravan and drove to see them. Following the rules but breaking the old routines brought a sense of continuity to the lives of the writers. As Scott (2017) has argued, doing something else instead can generate events that would not have been possible without the non-doing. Hence, nothingness is not always the final state of things. Not being able to do something can also generate something new – even hope:

> All in all, life has been lovely and peaceful. I have done things at my own pace without timetables or commitments. We needed this kind of a stop to reflect on the things that are important to us and what we truly want. – A tiny virus forced the whole world to its knees. A pause was needed, as now we can see how vulnerable we are. It's about time to think how to take better care of our nature and climate. They don't need us, but we need them. What do we want to leave for the generations to come? Hopefully we are not too late. (Female, 73 years old).

Both hope and concerns about the future, even the future of the whole world, were present in the letters. It has been shown that opportunities to enjoy nature and outdoor life were significant to many older persons in Finland during the pandemic (Tiilikainen et al., 2021). To not have such nature or opportunities to enjoy was difficult to imagine, which in turn created the need to protect nature.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to shed light on the everyday lives of Finnish older people during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing and self-isolation have caused a myriad of challenges to older people's well-being worldwide, and although Finland has been quite successful in protecting its citizens, the pandemic has taken its toll there as well. In this article, I was interested in the descriptions of ordinary, mundane events that occur daily, such as grocery shopping or walking outside, and of things which normally go below the radar of our attention, such as school yards and food shelves in the nearest supermarket. The pandemic broke our routines in many ways and forced us to reorganise how we do things, exercise, educate ourselves and are in contact with other people. However, that is only one side of the story.

The social distance from other people, the ever so meaningful empty meters between people, has revealed to us how close we actually were before the pandemic. I argue that reversing the typical analytical lens from things that are to things that are not (or have never been but are still imagined) widens our understanding of the meaningfulness of social interactions, social spaces and identity work of older persons. As Neal and Murji (2015) write, the most mundane and ordinary practices and social interactions also reflect manifestations of wider social structures and divisions. What are the roles and role expectations given to older people and what do the restrictions tell us about the social imaginary of old age?

In the article I asked, 1) How did the writers describe the contents which are missing from their lives? and 2) What kinds of meanings did these expressions of nothingness have for older persons? The findings show that not having certain things was the first sign of the pandemic for many. The writers noticed the empty supermarket shelves, empty school yards, the empty meters between them and other people, but they interpreted them somewhat differently. For instance, empty supermarket shelves created worry and a feeling of threat, since they broke the

sense of continuity and certainty that people are used to in the Finnish society. Not having social contact with other people was painful for many of the writers, but some experienced it also as a way to have more time for themselves or their spouses. Some experienced the social distance as a protective and concrete safe distance to other people, others as something that socially separated them from others. These somewhat opposite experiences and interpretations partly show why the age-specific restrictions were controversial – they concerned 'a group' of people that form over one sixth of the total Finnish population and whose age difference is over 30 years (from 70 to over 100 years of age), so it is not surprising that the restrictions felt arbitrary to many.

Restriction measures that were applied to all persons aged over 70 altered people's social space, making it narrower in many ways and a realm of lost experiences (Scott, 2020). The times of national holidays during which there were no family gatherings or social events in voluntary organisations or parishes were especially hard for writers. Lost experiences were also connected to the lack of physical contact between family members - a contact that technology could not replace. Here again the sudden nothingness revealed how important physical contact, such as a hug, can be when it is no longer possible to give.

Age-specific restriction measures also had an impact on the identities of older persons and on how they perceived themselves in relation to others. Although many understood and accepted the restrictions, the writers still rejected the label of being 'old' and described in detail how they were still active and not in a need of protection. Interestingly, as Skeggs (2004) has noted, these descriptions of capability, self-autonomy and overall activeness also reveal the connotations that are linked to the frailty of the fourth age and the loss of one's self-identity (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, 2011; Higgs & Gilleard, 2014). Hence, the self-isolation period was, for many, a reminder of their age and mortality, and further connected to the fear of losing one's place in a social world and to the idea that older persons themselves did not carry meaning in other people's eyes.

Even though the focus of this article was on the 'negative' aspect of things, that does not simply mean that the lack of something was negative in itself. Rather, the lack of something also had positive outcomes such as freedom from obligations. Freeing oneself from duties in, for instance, voluntary organisations was a symbolic act representing individual choice to be "at peace". Like the act of dis-identification, disengaging, that is, not-doing something, was an act that gave the power of decision-making back to some of the writers. Disengagement also enabled an alternative course of action, leading the writers closer to things they really wanted to do or regarded as important. In addition, not following the news or dropping out from Facebook were both acts that were meaningful to writers since it allowed them to have some control over their own lives.

This article has concentrated mainly on the descriptions of older persons to whom 'oldhood' has been almost a non-identity – their age had a real meaning to them only when society decided that they were in need of protection, and that they were vulnerable. Many writers, regardless of their age, saw themselves as active citizens that had meaning beyond the realm of vulnerability – a fact that societies should acknowledge in planning the return to the "normal". However, this was also a limitation of the study, as it does not explore the experiences of people in more vulnerable positions. Social isolation, loneliness and inequalities in different life situations of older persons have been enforced by the pandemic, but also by societal practices and discourses, at least some of which have been ageist (Naughton, Padeiro, & Santana, 2021; Skipper & Rose, 2021). Using chronological age as a category for different restrictions is problematic in many ways (Lumme-Sandt et al., 2020), which was evident in the letters as well. Personal life and family circumstances, the state of health and the place of living were actually more important factors in determining the ways the writers experienced the restrictions than their chronological age. Furthermore, as Naughton et al. (2021) noted in their article, using age as a category for different restrictions treated citizens of certain age as others, forgetting the "many

different faces of age and aging" (p. 9). In the future, societies should more carefully consider whether these kinds of categories protect people or distance them even further away from others.

Further research is certainly needed on the impact of the pandemic on older people's lives in different social spaces such as in home care, institutional care and family care, but the lives of relatively healthy and independent older persons in different countries should also be researched more carefully. Everyday life is filled with small doings and beings that compose the social world we are living in, but the not-doings and not-beings are also part of the same social world; sometimes they are even more meaningful than things that we already have. By flipping the typical analytical focus from 'things that happened' to 'things that did not happen', this study sheds light on the experiences and descriptions of older persons' unlived lives.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Acknowledgements

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