The Radars project: a community approach to loneliness

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Radars is a project designed to enable local residents, entities, services and shops to take care of the elderly, with sensitivity and respect, from nearby, from the immediate, everyday environment of the elderly people who inhabiting the city's neighbourhoods.

Introduction

We live in an increasingly longer-living society and, in recent years, the study of ageing has aroused the interest of various sciences, as well as helping to see the ageing process as a more complex phenomenon. Historically, it was a process explained from the perspective of medical science, where biological aspects were of paramount importance. Currently, however, general health and ageing are being explained more specifically from a broader, biological and psychosocial perspective.

The relational aspect is a basic factor for peoples' well-being and having a supportive social network is an important element when measuring the quality of life of the elderly. Failure to have a network, apart from leading a person into a situation of (often unwanted) loneliness, can also lead to increased risks on multiple levels, both to physical health (*Cacioppo et al.,* 2007). 2002; O'Luanaigh and Lawlor, 2008) and psychological health (*Cacioppo et al.*, 2006; Holwerda *et al.*, 2016).

Unwanted loneliness is a complex phenomenon to describe, so there is no consensus on a single definition, although theoretical approaches can be summarised in four perspectives (Yanguas *et al.*, 2018):

- Cognitive perspective: loneliness is understood as a discrepancy between the social relationships that a person desires and those they really have.

- Interactionism: loneliness is not about being alone, it is the lack of meaningful and intimate relationships, as well as the lack of community bonding.

- Psychodynamic perspective: loneliness is the negative consequence of the need to feel close to people, to have interpersonal relationships that give a meaning to life.

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- Existentialism: loneliness is a reality that is inherent to humans, it can cause suffering and pain or it can be an opportunity.

Unwanted loneliness may be present at any time in the life cycle, but it is during the ageing process when it is associated with smaller social networks and a lower frequency of human contact (Ajrouch *et al.,* 2005). The loss process associated with ageing is multifactorial and exacerbates relationship difficulties: relational losses, such as those in the workplace after retirement; loss of a partner or friends with whom leisure time is shared (by death, entry into a residence or the appearance of cognitive impairment); losses from the nearby cohabiting circle (neighbours and local shops they have been living with for years that are now "replaced" by less stable residents or more impersonal commercial chains); loss of mobility, vision or other capabilities; loss of the spaces "belonging" to the neighbourhood with urban changes, and so on.

Although the loss process is not reversible in some respects, action can be taken in terms of the consequences it brings. Often this loss process is accompanied by a lack of foresight, the design of a large living pattern that makes it difficult for people suffering from unwanted loneliness to change the situation. However, all people have potential and, in the case of people who feel lonely, that potential must be taken into account in the action taken to end this situation and remake the links lost.

Thus, the Radars project approach to breaking with unwanted loneliness is to build a community network which seeks to involve everyone in building kinder, more responsive communities that respect older people, close communities that take care of the people who are part of their immediate environment and help to re-establish ties with the local area, in order to end the unwanted loneliness in the most natural way possible: by putting life back into the neighbourhoods with some clear components of friendly interaction and closeness.

Origins of the Radars project
The Radars project is a community initiative led by the basic social services which arose in the Camp d'en Grassot and Gràcia Nova neighbourhoods (Gràcia district) in Barcelona in 2008.[4] In a context marked by the increase in vulnerable situations, in part due to demographic changes (such as changes in the residential model from extended households to nuclear or single-person households, or the increase in divorce, life expectancy and migration in working age, etc.), and also after some internal reflection, the area social services concluded the community needed to be involved in order to improve the detection and prevention of risk situations and alleviate the loneliness that older people may feel. Thus, with these two major goals in mind, Radars was born at a time when public policy did not have any long-standing, proven tools for combating loneliness. That meant building from scratch and giving shape to the project through a process of trial and error.

To achieve its goals, the Radars project directs its efforts towards raising awareness about the situation of elderly people and creating a neighbourhood network that will make the city a safer and more friendly space for this group. At the heart of it lies the idea of "becoming a village again" where everyone knows each other and support networks are a given. As a community project, it is built collectively alongside the residents of the neighbourhood, with its facilities and services, shops and pharmacies, neighbourhood entities, social and health services and all the other local resources. This co-production implies the existence of co-responsibility, which redefines the roles and values of both professionals and agents in that environment who, together, design new communication mechanisms and experiment with new intervention methodologies.

The project's emphasis prior to the implementation of the Promoting Autonomy and Care for Dependent Persons Act (2008-2012) was on detecting risk situations. Thanks to this Act, many people contacted Social Services, which made it easier to detect and address the most

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4. The project can be consulted on its website, radarsgentgran@bcn.cat , as well as in this explanatory video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K3EQVNANul.

problematic ones. Since then, Radars has been able to concentrate on combating unwanted loneliness, from a residential perspective (older people living alone) to a more broadly focused one – the feeling of that unwanted loneliness.

The fact that a person lives alone does not directly imply they need more help but people who do not have strong social ties and do not leave their homes are more likely to be at risk (Klinenberg, 2001), as this may become a factor of vulnerability if, for example, health conditions worsen. In the same vein, living alone may not lead to a feeling of loneliness (though it is more likely). In fact, apart from the reality of older people living alone (25% of people over 65, 31% of people over 75 and 38% of people over 85 in Barcelona), as stated above, there is a feeling of loneliness that may not be associated with living alone, since it is subjective and manifests itself in the face of the discrepancy between "desired relationships" and "real relationships".

It should be borne in mind that one of the biggest difficulties in dealing with unwanted loneliness is that it is a feeling that, at times, can be difficult for people to admit (to those around them and sometimes even to themselves). That is because it can be a feeling which can make us feel embarrassed, to the extent that the person who feels this way may fear that their circle will judge them for being alone and consider that their loneliness is the result of their own decisions and actions throughout life.

To reverse this reality, it is necessary for the entire circle around elderly people to be involved in creating a kinder society that is more sensitive to them. Radars therefore seeks to create a supportive neighbourhood network that increases the possibilities of detecting all these situations, addresses the possible risks from different angles and, in particular, makes it easier to re-establish the older people's links with the area they live in, while helping them to participate in that process.

How the Radars project works

The Radars project is a community action project promoted by Barcelona City Council social services. All the lines of action followed within the framework of the Radars project are based on the following scheme:

Diagram 1. Network of operations of the Radars project
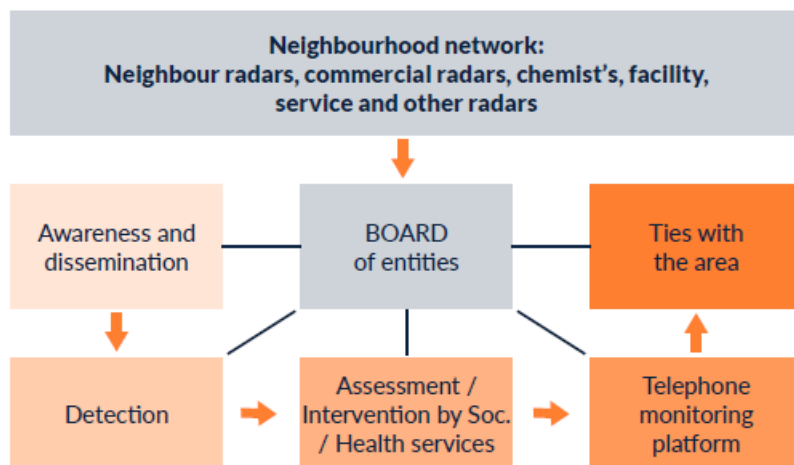
The project is rolled out around a community space, the RADARS Board, and generates a space for participation and decisions on the lines of work that must be followed at each point in the project. It is a space open to all stakeholders in the community who want to participate and contribute to improving the quality of life of older people.

Each of the spaces plays a prominent role in constructing the lines of work, which take different forms in each area without forgetting Radars' objectives. So, awareness-raising and outreach activities are carried out in all the neighbourhoods, as well as actions to detect older people in

situations of unwanted loneliness, follow-up phone calls with the indispensable help of volunteers, and actions to establish links with the area.

In order to carry out awareness-raising activities, we rely on volunteers going to shops and chemists, as well as putting up stalls to publicise the project with the aim of making it known and fostering a neighbourhood network that can sustain situations of unwanted loneliness and, at the same time, communicate risk situations. The project has in mind a figure known as the neighbour radar, that is, the person who provides us with information and joins the project as an aware and informed citizen, and who we offer the tools for communicating with social services so they can warn us of any elderly person in their circle in a situation of risk or unwanted loneliness. We believe in the value of closeness. If an older person receives attention from their close circle, they are more confident about starting their relationship with the project.

The task of detection is shared by the various players in the community because it is promoted among the public together with a sensitive outlook towards the elderly, in particular those who may be in a situation of vulnerability. In that sense, the Radars project carries out actions to raise public awareness and focuses on those people who, due to their links with the area, may be better able to detect problems. Thus, local shops, chemists, professionals, organisations, associations and neighbours are invited to join the project as detection assets. All of them, together with the Board participants, form the neighbourhood network.

The Telephone Monitoring Platform, made up exclusively of volunteers, is responsible for making calls to elderly persons detected by the Radars network and, thanks to the relationship of trust they establish, inviting them to activities in significant neighbourhood spaces in which they will play a prominent role, alongside other elderly people, and in which the volunteers will play the role of facilitator in promoting peer relationships.

Area social services lead the transformative and integrative process in the neighbourhood, seeking to stimulate the capacity of action that the various agents have, based on their own autonomy, and encourage them to collaborate and deal with conflicts – if there are any – in order to enhance each of the spheres outlined and build or strengthen the so-called *neighbourhood network*. Thanks to working with the neighbourhood network, elderly people in general and Radars users in particular will find a neighbourhood that is more friendly and respectful towards them.

The Radars project approach to breaking with unwanted loneliness: trusted calls and nearby activities
Various strategies exist to alleviate the loneliness of the elderly. There are some longstanding organisations that opt for accompanying them, both individuals and groups. Volunteers visit the home of an older person and then accompany them to a group activity. At the Radars project we are committed to the community methodology in the form of various actions.

An elderly person detected by Social Services, the CAP (health centre) or the neighbourhood network enters Radars when they say that they feel lonely or want to have more contact with the neighbourhood. Once they have joined, they receive regular calls from Radars volunteers, who call them from a neighbourhood facility or Social Services. The purpose of the call is simply to be able to spend some time on the phone and have a space to talk to someone else, in which being close is a factor (the volunteer is from the same neighbourhood, which is perceived positively). Within the framework of the call, a space of mutual knowledge is generated, which in most cases ends up leading to the key question and an equally important answer: when will we be able to meet? We will meet in the context of an activity we have organised. These activities of linking people with the area are organised from the Radars neighbourhood board. Once this initial contact has been established, it is easier to encourage users to re-enter their surroundings and, through the neighbourhood network, offer activities that take place locally and which may be of the interest to users of the project, with the aim that, whether alone or accompanied, they are linked to some activity or reference space and gradually become more independent when going out of the house.

Social Services and the neighbourhood network ensure there is someone to accompany elderly people who do not have enough autonomy to attend the linking activities.

Experience shows that people who are in a situation of unwanted loneliness are less resistant to going out if the suggestion comes from someone they have an emotional link with, such as those established with volunteers who call them frequently.

It is worth noting that not all users of the Radars project end up coming to linking activities, in some cases, due to mobility difficulties (despite the offer of someone accompanying them) and in others, because they simply choose not to come. However, they value the calls positively and recognise that the time they spend talking to their volunteer is a recreation time, different from what they are used to in their day-to-day life. They see the call as a possibility and choose what their level of involvement is in the project.

With regard to participation in the project at the beginning of 2019, and in view of the success of the linking activities, several Radars project areas highlighted the need to increase the frequency of these activities and, at the same time, organise them in more informal spaces. These meetings are called *small moments* and, in these communication spaces, the autonomy of the group is encouraged so the people themselves decide on the meeting place, the frequency, the topics they deal with and so on. The meeting group is usually a stable group that new people gradually join. They are made up of people who live close by, in order to achieve a double closeness effect: that of the link between the volunteer and the elderly person who is participating, and also that of a close space that is recognised by the elderly person and, at the same time, gives them security.

Preventing risk situations, another of the project's objectives
Apart from alleviating unwanted loneliness, another goal of the project is to prevent risk situations developing. In the call space, once trust has been established between the volunteer and the elderly person receiving the call, conversations may arise where an implicit request is made or situations that are considered at risk are explained. In these cases, the role of the volunteer is to inform the Social Services so that they can evaluate the intervention.

To achieve this goal, the volunteers have joint working spaces with Social Services, as well as the necessary guidelines for reporting risk situations and for Social Services to evaluate the case in order to decide on the action. That is why we can say that Radars project volunteers also act as a protection network for the older people they call.

Calls are a space for risk prevention but bear in mind that when an elderly person attends activities, establishes links with facilities, makes new friends, etc., they are also weaving a network that serves to prevent risk situations because the more neighbourhood relationships you have, the more friendships and community life you have, the less fragile you are.

Radars volunteers: training and support. Encouraging active ageing
Radars volunteers are present at various phases and stages of the project. They are responsible for spreading information and raising awareness in the neighbourhood, attracting shops, chemists and neighbours that act as radars, making calls to the elderly and also for the activities to which they are invited. In order to perform all these tasks, they receive the help and support of Social Services staff.

When you join the volunteers, you are provided with basic training so that you know about your rights and duties, as well as more specific training on the work that you will be doing. These training sessions, which are compulsory, ensure that volunteers have all the information before starting their work and that the project functions properly. It should be pointed out that during the first weeks of volunteering they receive support from Social Services staff.

As regards the profile of Radars volunteers, it is worth noting that the average age is 67.5, which means we are also fulfilling another goal: promoting active ageing. Participation in volunteering

activities among older people can be a positive factor for successful and positive ageing (Ferrada and Zavala, 2014).

Current status of the project
The Radars project began in 2008, in the neighbourhood of Camp d'en Grassot and Gràcia Nova. It has gradually spread to other Barcelona, supported by a technical team who specialise in community work and ageing. The project is currently present in 49 of the city's 73 neighbourhoods. That translates into 32 Radars project boards, the decision-making forums where citizens can participate in developing the project, make decisions and contribute ideas and initiatives that help to make their environment more elderly friendly and sensitive.

Results and effects of the Radars project: a pioneering community project in dealing with unwanted loneliness and detecting risk
In the process of evaluating the project, several studies have been carried out on users' links and their situation. In the last survey (August 2019) it was found that 81% of users were in better spirits. A third (34%) say they go out more often since they have been receiving calls and, as a result, know their neighbourhood better. Participation in Radars project activities stands at 49.6% and participants say they have met new people, which contributes to their socialisation. The overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) say they would recommend participation in the project.

This information, after Radars has been running for more than ten years, leads us to conclude that the project improves participants' quality of life, while working on the awareness of people around them, and fosters neighbourhoods that are closer to their elderly citizens.
In that sense, Radars has been a pioneering project in community care for unwanted loneliness and risk detection, which has meant that several local authorities have been interested in replicating the project in their municipalities. So far, Barcelona City Council has signed an agreement with the city councils of Badalona, Granollers, Mataró, Premià de Mar, Arenys de Mar, Arenys de Munt, Igualada and Xàbia. These councils receive initial support from the project's technical team so they can promote it in their municipalities.

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