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Forced to live in the present: older people's temporal experiences of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic

Emilia Leinonen  and Salla Era

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Centre of Excellence in Research on Ageing and Care, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

Corresponding author: Emilia Leinonen; Email: emilia.a.leinonen@jyu.fi

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Abstract

This article explores the temporalities experienced by persons aged 70 years and over during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. Although the temporalities of the pandemic have been analysed from multiple perspectives, we contribute to this line of research in two ways. First, we show how deeply the pandemic affected older people's experiences of temporality. Second, we further develop the concept of *forced present* to highlight the consequences that the restriction measures had on older persons' situations and perceptions of temporality. More specifically, we asked the following question: How did older people perceive time (past, present and future) during the pandemic? We used thematic analysis to examine a dataset consisting of written letters (N = 77) collected between April and June 2020. The findings showed that social isolation forced older people to live in the present without being able to plan their near future because they had no knowledge of when they would be 'free' again, which made some participants feel anxious and depressed. Furthermore, we found that the present became intertwined with the personal past as well as with the collective past, as evidenced by participants' descriptions of war, previous pandemics and hardships. This article deepens our understanding of older people's everyday lives during the pandemic and highlights the problematic nature of social isolation of older people as a safety measure. Overall, this article reveals the particularity of older people's experiences in unequal pandemic times and the ageism inherent in the restriction measures.

Keywords: COVID-19; Finland; forced present; lockdown; older people; temporalities

Introduction

Daily life involves mundane events and tasks that generally happen at the same time and in the same order. These routines help us make sense of the everyday life around us – that is, to keep it predictable, continuous and safe (Scott, 2009).

This continuity was severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for older people. In Finland, during the first three months of the pandemic, the government recommended that persons over 70 years of age isolate themselves as a safety measure. When this recommendation was issued, no one knew how long the social isolation period would actually last. For instance, in May 2020, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, estimated that social isolation measures could last until the end of 2020 (Beck and Morris, 2020). The Finnish social isolation recommendation was formulated in an obligatory tone, stating that people aged 70 years and over 'are obliged to refrain from contact with other persons' and should stay 'in quarantine-like conditions' (Government of Finland, 2020). Furthermore, the government requested 'people over 70 to avoid close contact and movement outside their homes' (Government of Finland, 2020). This recommendation had multiple consequences: older people were suddenly confined to their immediate surroundings, also in a temporal sense, and had to reconstruct their daily lives in new ways to maintain a safe distance from others. In this article, we are interested in how the pandemic and the social isolation measures affected older people's temporalities, that is, their perceptions of time and the social organisation of time, and their orientation in the new everyday life. To this end, we examined the meanings and experiences of time during the social isolation period by analysing written letters collected from older people between April and June 2020.

Although experiences of temporality during the pandemic have been analysed from multiple perspectives (e.g. Loose *et al.*, 2021; Velasco *et al.*, 2021; Howell, 2022), few studies have explored older people's views. Research on older people and their temporal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic has mainly concentrated on coping strategies and future time perspectives. For instance, 'to have time for something' has been conceptualised as a coping strategy for older people during the COVID-19 crisis: by accepting the current situation, older persons could find security and gain control of their lives if they viewed the restriction measures as *temporary*, as Verhage *et al.* (2021) demonstrated in the Dutch context. Chronological age has been shown to be a central factor in perceived time. For example, a study by Rupprecht *et al.* (2022: 268) on COVID-19 and time perspectives revealed that 'older age was related to weaker future time opportunity, weaker future time extension, stronger future time constraint and lower death anxiety'. Particularly at the start of the pandemic, those individuals who anticipated the potential damage of the coronavirus disease to be more severe perceived more limited future time perspectives (Rupprecht *et al.*, 2022) – that is, they expected less from the future in terms of the remaining lifetime and opportunities in the upcoming years.

In this article, we contribute to this line of research in two ways. First, we empirically show how deeply the pandemic affected older people's experiences of temporality. Second, we further develop the concept of the *forced present* (Read and Leathwood, 2018) to highlight the consequences that the restriction measures had on older persons' situations and perceptions of temporality. More specifically, in our study, we asked the following question: How did older people perceive time (past, present and future) during the social isolation period? Our aim was to understand what it meant for older persons to be forced to remain in social isolation,

which, during the early months of the pandemic, seemed unending. In terms of analytical framework, we used Mead's (1932) nonlinear theory of time to show how the past and the future were reinterpreted and anticipated from the present crisis perspective – that is, from 'pandemic times'. We argue that social isolation forced older people to live in the present without being able to plan their near futures as they had no knowledge of when they would be 'free' again. Furthermore, we show how the unending present of the COVID-19 pandemic was also a collective experience, as evidenced by the participants' descriptions of war, previous pandemics and hardships. Overall, this article reveals the particularity of older people's experiences in pandemic times and the ageism inherent in the restriction measures.

From the present to the past and the future

In social scientific analyses of time and temporality, postmodern life has been described as fast, accelerating and hectic (e.g. Wajcman, 2008; Rosa, 2013). Scholars have argued that people generally lack time for meaningful things (Parkins, 2004) and suffer from time poverty (Wajcman, 2008); in other words, time has become compressed (Adam, 2007; Wajcman, 2008). In fact, due to its fragmented and short-term nature, modern time has been described as 'instantaneous time' that accelerates beyond human consciousness (Urry, 2000). In addition to being hectic, the temporal space of the present has come to encompass the future, which has been conceptualised as 'presentification' (Leccardi, 2005) or the 'extended present' (Nowotny, 1994); both concepts refer to an extended sense of the present whereby the future is perceived as already 'here and now' (the future is in the present) or beyond confident imagination (the future time perspective does not exist). As Suckert (2021) put it, the acceleration of the capitalistic time regime has turned the future into a field of dissolution as well as a field that needs to be constantly measured, scheduled and forecasted. However, the pandemic collided with this time regime by halting societies and social life, and revealing the unequal temporal autonomies of different social groups (Suckert, 2021). One such 'group' that suffered from unequal temporal autonomy during the pandemic was older persons.

In Finland, the recommendation to self-isolate concerned more than 870,000 people – that is, over 15 per cent of the Finnish population. The recommendation stemmed from the fact that older persons were more likely to contract a more severe form of the virus. The recommendation was lifted on 20 May 2020, but some age-specific recommendations remained. As older people were still a risk group, they had to maintain contact with others remotely (*i.e.* by phone) and meet their relatives outside, without any physical contact such as hugging. In addition, visits to nursing homes were prohibited (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). In addition to the most severe consequences of the pandemic, a survey conducted by the Finnish Pensioner's Federation with persons aged 60 years and over reported the further effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, 57 per cent of the respondents reported decreased mobility outside the home, 55 per cent stated that they had fewer hobbies than before and 49 per cent had less contact with other people (60+ Barometer, 2021).

It has been argued, however, that older persons in general had more resilience towards the pandemic because they could reflect on the current situation in relation to their past experiences (Perez-Rojo *et al.* 2022). Therefore, to analyse how the past and the future were intertwined with the present in older persons' everyday life perceptions during the pandemic, we followed Mead's (1932) nonlinear theory of time. According to the nonlinear theory of time, situations are constantly (re)interpreted through interactions with others as well as with memories of the past and expectations for the future (Barken, 2014). Moreover, not only is the present interpreted through past and future, but the past and future are interpreted through the present – in a sense, the past, present and future 'bleed' into one another. Thus, for Mead, the present is constantly evolving and moving, and the past and the future are formed in and by the present. Mead calls this constant change the 'specious present', which signifies an individual's capacity to interpret and anticipate the future (Mead, 1932; Kubala and Hoření Samec, 2021), meaning that there is no static, single present.

Thus, the present represents what is happening and the future everything that could happen (Mead, 1932; Flaherty and Fine, 2001). As people tend to anticipate incoming events, the future is both hypothetical and immediate – that is, defined by uncertainty as well as anticipation (Mead, 1932). Meanwhile, the past is the terrain for the interpretation of 'facts' (Flaherty and Fine, 2001) because past events gain new meanings in the light of emerging events (Mead, 1932). Maines *et al.* (1983) identified the following four dimensions in Mead's theory of the reinterpreted past: symbolic past, social-structural past, objective past and mythical past. Symbolically reconstructed past involves people redefining past events to make them meaningful in the present. Social-structural past refers to the ways in which past events generate probable future events without determining them. Objective past is the established understanding of what existed in the past. Finally, mythical past refers to the symbolic creations of the past that may not be grounded in reality.

In this article, in addition to employing the nonlinear theory of time, we use and further develop the concept of the forced present. This concept is related to the aforementioned concepts of the extended present (Nowotny, 1994) and presentification (Leccardi, 2005). In previous research, forced present has been used only, to the best of our knowledge, to describe the precariousness of academic labour in terms of the reduced ability to confidently plan the future, *e.g.* early career academics can get stuck in the present because the future is uncertain, as work contracts are frequently short term (Read and Leathwood, 2018).

The same kind of precariousness could be found in the situation of older people during the pandemic. As Adam (2007) wrote, 'The future matters.' However, we argue that, for instance, it matters differently for adolescents than for older people, whose time horizon is already limited. For Leccardi (2005), presentification is a privileged strategy of biographical construction among young people because they *can* foresee only the present or the very near future. For example, in Leccardi's study, higher education students saw their futures only until graduation, as what came after was beyond confident imagination. However, in terms of older people, particularly the oldest old, this privilege often turns into a kind of forced presentism because they, literally, have no time to wait. Furthermore, under social isolation, the

present is not filled to the brim (Nowotny, 1994; Brannen, 2005); instead, the present is full of ‘nothing’ – that is, cancelled events, the absence of other people and the social emptiness of everyday life (Scott, 2017; Leinonen, 2022). With the concept of forced present, we want to emphasise the disruptive nature of the social isolation period on older people’s perceptions of the continuity and predictability of their everyday lives.

Data and method

Our data consisted of written letters from persons aged 70 years and over in Finland. The call for letters was published in early April 2020 and remained open until the end of June 2020. The call was distributed mostly through social media, particularly Facebook, because of the relatively high number of social media users in Finland (in 2020, 46% of the share of persons aged 65–74 years and 16% of the total share of persons aged 75–89 years; Statistics Finland, 2023). This decision, however, limited the number of potential writers. To be more inclusive, we also made a bulletin that was published in four regional newspapers. In the letters we received, a total of 13 participants wrote that they had either seen the newspaper article about the call or had been told about it by family or friends. This means that some of the participants did not use social media at all.

The aim of the call was to collect older people’s experiences about the situation and social isolation. By choosing to use letters as a medium to collect the experiences, we were able to reach older persons from different parts of Finland without needing to use, for instance, the snowballing method. Furthermore, there were no research projects going on through which we could have been able to contact potential participants. As Morgan *et al.* (2023) have stated, the strengths of using written letters as a data collection method are that they provide greater distance and confidentiality between the writer and the researchers since the writers were able to participate anonymously. In addition, compared for instance to interviews, this method gave more power and self-determination to the writers as they were able to correct and change their way of thinking more freely and easily while writing. The method also allowed them to decide how much time they wanted to use for writing. However, compared to interviews, we were not able to ask follow-up questions. The data collection method also meant that the participants were to be able to write, either by hand or by computer.

In the call, we asked potential participants to write openly about their situations and possible changes in their surroundings, including their living environments, homes, received services and daily lives. Participants were specifically encouraged to write about how they experienced the restrictions and the recommendation to remain in quarantine-like conditions that the government recommended for persons over 70 years of age. Regarding background, participants were asked to provide information on their gender, age, where and with whom they lived, and family relations. The call for letters was geared to be as open as possible to foster free expression without the risk of writers interpreting the call as a structured questionnaire asking for a short answer to each question. The writers could provide their accounts anonymously, but in case they were willing to participate in a possible follow-up enquiry, they were asked to give their names and contact information. Three

means of sending the letters were established: by regular mail, by secure email or by using an anonymous Webropol survey tool. During the data collection process, we followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). Information on data protection, the use of personal data, the rights of the participants and the purpose of the study were posted on the university's website to ensure that the participants could make an informed decision regarding participation. The policy on data and privacy protection was also available as simplified text on the website.

We received 41 letters by email, 20 by mail and 16 by Webropol, which amounted to 77 letters in total. The age of the participants ranged from 70 to 93 years based on those writers who disclosed their age ($N = 66$). The median age was 73 years and the average age was 75.7 years. Although most writers were in their seventies, there were 13 writers over the age of 80 and three over the age of 90. The participants were mostly women (75% of those who disclosed gender, $N = 72$). The majority (60%) lived with a spouse, while the rest lived alone. Regarding regions, most of the letters came from Southern Finland, Central Finland, Northern Finland and Lapland. The length of the letters varied, with the shortest being only a few lines and the longest 69 pages. The typical length was approximately one and a half pages, and the whole dataset amounted to 300 Word pages in total. The topics were diverse and included topics such as feelings, hobbies, technology, family members and visits, and the importance of nature, as well as larger themes such as climate change and the labour market.

Method

We became specifically interested in the descriptions of time in our dataset when we read a letter by an older woman who stated, 'At least I have time now.' We wondered what it meant to 'have time' or that 'time feels empty', particularly in such unusual circumstances as the pandemic. In our study, we employed the method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). First, we read through the whole dataset in Atlas.ti 22 using a highly open coding strategy: we coded all sections in the letters that described time, temporality, past, future, rhythms and duration with the simple code 'time'. As a result, we obtained 99 quotations (from 33 different letters, 38 pages in total, single-spaced lines).

While rereading the dataset, we started paying attention to descriptions of 'living in the present' and 'not knowing when this will end'. Among the letters, a particularly striking comment came from a 93-year-old woman who wrote that 'time was stolen from us, older persons'. This led us to consider how people over 70 years of age were forced to live in the present because their possibilities of planning their futures suddenly decreased significantly. At the same time, the writers also reflected on and compared their memories about past pandemics, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident and other hardships to the present moment. In a sense, the past and the future were 'bleeding' into the present. After reading Mead's (1932) *The Philosophy of the Present*, we decided to use his nonlinear theory of time as an analytical tool to explore how the perspectives of time changed during the pandemic.

As a result, we reorganised our dataset into the following three main themes: forced to live in the present, the present interpreted through the past and uncharted

future. It is important to note, as Mead argued, that the present, the past and the future are not isolated themes; instead, they are intertwined, as will be made evident by our findings, which we present next.

Findings

Our findings are organised as follows: first we present the theme ‘forced to live in the present’ which consists of descriptions of how ‘everything stopped’, how time felt monotonous and how the writers felt that they were imprisoned. The second theme, ‘the present interpreted through the past’, includes descriptions of previous pandemics and wartime, as well as reflections on the collective aspect of the pandemic period. The third theme, ‘uncharted future’, deals with anticipations and projections regarding the future, as well as fears of being forgotten.

Forced to live in the present

The pandemic stopped the familiar flow of time, which, during ‘normal times’, is filled with events and temporal landmarks, such as upcoming birthday parties, weekends and national holidays. As Velasco *et al.* (2021: 451) wrote, ‘a temporality without events is a boundless temporality, and this in itself is disorienting’. In the data, some of the participants felt that linear time stopped completely, while others saw time as becoming ‘specious’ because there was not as much to do as before (*see also Velasco et al., 2021*). The quotations exemplify how it felt to be forced to live in the present:

It felt like everything stopped. Fear crept into my mind, too. Every day, we watched current affairs programmes, different kinds of reports, experts’ views and listened to ministers and people of health. I didn’t have time to do much else than try to listen and understand and in that way be up to date with this corona situation ... There were so many questions, and we lived day by day with the unpredictability. We needed to live every day, however. We had to construct our everyday life somehow. (Female, 71 years old)

Weekdays and Sundays are more and more entangled in a monotonous life. At times, I have to stop and think which weekday it is. Since we are pensioners, weekdays haven’t meant so much to us before, but there were, however, stages that kept our life in a traditional week rhythm. (Male, 71 years old)

The need to stay up to date with the whole situation clearly affected the writers’ experiences of their daily lives. In the first quotation, the writer describes attempting to make sense of the situation by staying up to date to the point where she felt that she did not have time for anything else, being bound to the present moment. The second writer, however, felt more disoriented because there were no specific events that would structure his week. Both quotations highlight the importance of a sense of continuity and predictability in our daily lives. The first writer attempted to maintain continuity by keeping herself up to date with the constantly evolving situation, while for the second writer, the present and the future blended into a monotonous life with little diversity.

For some participants, the experience of being forced to live in the present was even more severe, producing connotations of imprisonment:

Being home alone makes life like a life sentence in an open prison. In Finland, life in prison means 12 years, but it's probable that the corona will not have disappeared by that time. (Anonymous)

Life goes on like this, however, but occasionally, it feels distressing. Like being a prisoner in your own home. Not [only] because of that, but because someone else has decided about this kind of quarantine. Nobody asked me anything, even though I see myself as someone who can make decisions about their own life and understand my situation by being careful enough, if needed. (Female, 70 years old)

That they say that this all [restrictions] has been done in order to keep us from getting ill is quite a hypocritical reason. I say this because I believe that the real reason is that they fear there's not enough medical capacity if we get ill. There's no room for baby boomers in care homes. It's better to keep us as prisoners in our homes because they believe that especially people over 70 years of age would get more seriously ill if they were infected by the virus. I'm having very unorthodox thoughts. As in, why should I even live anymore. (Female, 75 years old)

These connotations of imprisonment are worth further analysis. Previous research has shown that when life is paused because of, for example, incarceration, the perception of time shifts from clock time to social time (*e.g.* meal times or lock-up time) and personal time (*e.g.* self-organised time to cope with the sentence by reading books) (Brown, 1998). Similarly, in our study, older people organised their days according to personal time and social time by following current affairs and government news:

We quickly realised that the structure of the day was important. In the morning, wake up at half past six, morning coffee and magazines, Yle's [the Finnish Broadcasting Company's] morning TV. Then, go for a jog in the morning. Lunch. Household chores (one chore for every day), afternoon coffee, crafts, reading, dinner. The evening was 'our own time' for both of us so that we wouldn't quite get on each other's nerves. (Female, 72 years old)

When I wake up, I read the newspapers online and see if something new and interesting has come up. After the newspaper session, it's time for breakfast. Then, noon is usually filled with reading. As I told you, I follow social life on a daily basis, and part of it is watching the plenary sessions of the parliament. (Male, 71 years old)

As the above quotes show, in terms of time, the situation of older persons was difficult also because they had no knowledge of how long their 'sentences' would last. However, it is important to note that this feeling of being imprisoned depended significantly on how strictly the restrictions were interpreted: some of the participants did not leave their apartments, while others continued living quite normally, or at least as normally as the rest. In a way, some older people imprisoned themselves in their homes, not because of free choice, but because they interpreted the recommendation in such a way that they had to. These descriptions show the precariousness of older people's situations and how deeply social isolation also affected their identities and places in society.

Moreover, social isolation made some of the participants feel impatient and anxious about the future as well as unable to concentrate on anything:

I'm not enjoying reading anymore or other things I used to enjoy. I have become impatient, nothing interests me, if I would do a diagnosis on myself, I believe it would be close to moderate depression. I just want to sleep, sleep... Because then, I don't have to think about anything. The saddest thing is that I cannot hug my close ones or they me. Touch has always been important to me. Maybe loneliness and the same news every day are partly the reason for my depression: so and so many have died or gotten ill, and the empty nonsense talk by politicians that I cannot listen to anymore. Nearly three months of quarantine and no end in sight, tough, but maybe I'll bear it. (Female, 72 years old)

Now, I'm starting to get anxious, especially because of the uncertainty of the forthcoming months, as state authorities' and specialists' statements differ from each other surprisingly much. At times, the current information [about the coronavirus situation] indicates that there's only going to be two months until the peak of the disease, and then sometimes it's going to be two years. We who are over 70 years old must apparently wait the longest until we are free to live normal everyday life with others. (Male, 76 years old)

Here, the hypothetical future did not contain an endless array of possibilities (Mead, 1932); instead, the present became a terrain of repetition, with no new events in sight except for the updated numbers of cases. This finding is in line with those of Feldman (2018) on Palestinian refugees and their perception of time as an unending present. Social isolation limited people's ability to anticipate their future, which made some participants anxious and depressed. In other words, the inability to anticipate or look towards the future reduced the participants' temporal agency (Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Flaherty, 2011). The lockdown period made these participants focus strictly on matters of the present, which affected their motivation and forethought (Bandura, 2006). In Mead's terms, what marks the present is its becoming and disappearing, but for the participants, the present seemed to drag on, without turning into past – hence, being in the forced present.

The present interpreted through the past

Although forced to remain in the present, the participants gave meanings and interpreted the present through the past. As Mead (1932) argued, the past is always subordinate to the present. People tend to reconstruct their past symbolically, which means that individuals reinterpret past events to make the present more understandable and to maintain a sense of continuity in their lives (Maines *et al.*, 1983). In our dataset, it was interesting to find that the participants reflected on the present not only using their personal past but also through the collective past, particularly that of wartime:

In the beginning [of this letter], I used the plural form of the 'emergency conditions' on purpose because both of us were born during the [Second World] war and went through the emergency conditions of that time, which lasted at least 10 years. The Finnish Continuation War [1941–1944] in the middle of the war zone, the evacuation time during the Lapland War [1944–1945], our return to

destroyed Lapland, the times of the ration cards, schooling in modest conditions, *etc.* This emergency situation differs from the previous ones in the sense that when peace returned to Lapland, every day was better than the previous one. We felt that our future was in our own hands. Now, we are living in constant uncertainty that we cannot influence in a broader sense. (Male, 79 years old; female, 76 years old)

My husband and I got used to the new order surprisingly easily. We understood right away that this is not a punishment but that we are being protected. We didn't rebel against the government's instructions; we just adapted our life to the new form. Our parents were told to go to war, we are told to stay at home! We will survive surely! (Female, 73 years old)

In collective memory, the past is tied to the present by interpretation, part of which may be distorted (Mead, 1932; Wertsch and Roediger, 2008) or mythical (Maines *et al.*, 1983). This remembrance of war was mentioned in many letters, highlighting the central place of wartimes in Finnish collective memory and identity work, which involves the narrative in which Finland and the Soviet Union appear as David and Goliath. In collective memory, despite losing the war, Finland was the victor because it did not lose its independence. Thus, the past was both mythical and objective, as there is a collective understanding of past events. By comparing their situations to those of their parents, the participants could adapt themselves better to the restriction measures, thus easing their daily life. At the same time, the writer of the first quotation saw the past as easier than the present because back then, 'the future was in our own hands'. During the time described by the participant ('when peace returned to Lapland'), the crisis was over, and it was a period of rebuilding. The future seemed to be in their hands because there were no restrictions anymore, and people could create the future as they wished. Each day was a day further away from the crisis, whereas during the COVID-19 quarantine, the situation was static as the participants lived in the forced present.

As discussed earlier, scholars have argued that older people are more resilient in the face of hardships because they have already encountered difficult situations during their lives (Perez-Rojo *et al.*, 2022). Our data partly confirmed this insight:

Corona came suddenly and stayed for a long time, no one knows yet for how long. Now, people all over the world are afraid of the coronavirus. Similar experiences come to my mind. When I was nine years old, the Asian flu was going around the world. I didn't get infected, however, nor did my parents or other relatives or friends, so I don't remember being particularly afraid. Schools were open normally. The thing that has caused fear the most is that because of my age, I'm being categorised as belonging to a risk group. I have been under house arrest for weeks now. I haven't even dared to go to a grocery store. (Female, 71 years old)

The view from my window brings forth one very important element of my time during the corona quarantine: reflection. Reflection on different phases of life helps me to look at life outside myself. It opens up many points of view at this very moment. I can look to the past and see how people near me have survived different kinds of crisis situations. (Female, 82 years old)

As the quotations above show, the participants used past experiences to make sense of the present. Comparisons to the Asian flu in one participant's personal

past and the hardships endured by another's close ones made the COVID-19 pandemic appear manageable and survivable, just like in the previous crises. However, the image of the ever-resilient older person does not tell the whole story. It has been shown that the pandemic was a period marked by ageism in the sense that many people were categorised as frail and vulnerable without granting them the opportunity to decide for themselves (Ayalon, 2020; Zhang and Liu, 2021):

This affects my thoughts and psyche so heavily. [My mind] goes to ancient old things and gathers all miserable things, and I have to live through them again. If there has been sickness and grief, and now, I have to go through it all again, like I'm forced. I feel like I'm forced to go through things that I have already survived. I feel like I'm declining here, and I can't let these [things] go. This will bring some sort of change; life will not be the same as it was. To my mind, older people's situation hasn't been acknowledged. That even 70-year-olds and above are forced into this same form [quarantine], even though many are still in very good shape. I travelled a lot when I was 70! And did not need any help. And I rode a bicycle until I was 80 and until my knee was too frail. (Female, 91 years old)

I invented a new hobby. While I couldn't plan the future, I started to memorise old things. The downside of it is that I felt saddened and lonely. When I thought about my family and the grandchildren's mishaps and trips, I started to long to meet them ... Now, I'm quite happy with my situation because I have decided to stay with my own company. I decided that neither the government nor THL [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare] can impact my decision, I have made up my mind as an introverted person. My life is restricted and boring, but at least I can just be. Time has passed terrifyingly quickly. As I have many times said, younger people have more difficulties in adjusting themselves to the restrictions, as they have a life they think they can and wish to control. (Female, 73 years old)

In sum, the past was intertwined with the present both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the participants relied on past experiences to make sense of the current pandemic as one hardship among others that they had survived. On the other hand, they were forced to remain in the present and possibly relive traumatic events from the past.

Uncharted future

As shown above, the pandemic forced the participants to reinterpret their understanding of the present, memories of the past and even expectations for the future. According to Suckert (2021), the pandemic created radical uncertainty about the future, challenging its predictability. Social isolation was a period of uncertainty. Descriptions of the future varied from desperation in the sense that the participants did not see a future before them to expectations for a 'great change' in society. By interpreting past experiences and historical events, the participants attempted to make projections about the future:

Will this pandemic, too, this coronavirus, be here for many years? The Spanish flu killed children and adolescents. This pandemic is dangerous, especially for older persons. Based on this, I feel somewhat downhearted, are we living our very last

days for real? I have a strange sense of disbelief, as if I'm waiting for something. (Female, 74 years old)

It was actually good to revisit ancient events. They resemble very much the current events. Maybe we could read the sequel for this from the ancient epidemics? (Female, 73 years old)

Social-structural past (Maines *et al.*, 1983) refers to people's attempts to make sense of the present by expressing probabilities about the future based on past events. This attempt was visible in our data as well. In the above quotations, the future was approached as if it were coded in past events. In a way, the present was seen as equal to the past (identical to previous pandemics), with the consequences of the past becoming predictions for our future (what happened after the previous pandemics will happen again).

For some, however, the social isolation period pushed the future further away, beyond confident imagination:

It is what it is, however, I feel sad/annoyed because I feel that time is stolen from me (I'm 93 years old) and other older persons as well?? I know that our lives will never be the same! There is not enough time. (Female, 93 years old)

In the morning, I read a blog post 'three options which all are bad'. Suddenly, it struck me that this might continue for a long time, a really long time, especially in our age case. I felt desperate and sad. I discussed this with my husband and cried. I was thinking that we might still have a few years during which we still would have the strength to travel, do different things and be functional. And now it might be that we will live like ancient old people, only indoors. And when this, at some point ends, we are too old, and life has passed by. You grow old too fast. (Female, 70 years old)

During the pandemic, the future was something that older people could not plan for or even see because they were afraid that they would be too old to do things or that they would die before the restrictions were lifted. As the quote above shows, in addition to the lack of future, the quotations depict an unwanted future, that is, when they enter the world of 'real oldhood' and frailty, which in gerontological research has been conceptualised as the fourth age (Higgs and Gilleard, 2014). The participants stated that time was stolen from them and that their stolen present actually contained their stolen future as well, that is, the future before frailty.

The stolen future was also visible in the participants' descriptions of the fear of being forgotten. The following three quotations show that the participants worried about their relatives and loved ones forgetting them because of the restrictive measures:

The saddest thing is that we couldn't meet our dear children and their families. I was afraid that this two-and-a-half-year-old representative of [our family's] fourth generation would forget their great-grandmother and -father because we could not meet. (Female, 73 years old)

We have been actively keeping in touch with our old relatives who live elsewhere. The biggest problem is my mother-in-law, who has dementia and lives

in a care home, and, of course, all visits are prohibited, probably she won't recognise us at all after all this. Of course, we call her two times a week, but it's sometimes hopeless to have a successful phone call. (Female, 72 years old)

[Writing about her husband who has dementia and lives in a care home and about them being unable to meet because of the restrictions.] In one call, he thought I was his mother, that was quite a thing for me because until now he has recognised me. We saw each other through a window during Easter when I was passing by the care home, I saw my husband through a window with a nurse. I blew him kisses and waved; he blew me a kiss. This is so hard in so many ways. Unavoidably, one wonders whether he will recognise me at all when all this is over and we'll get to see each other for real. (Female, 82 years old)

Again, the writers were forced to live exclusively in the present time but with a worry that they might not exist in other persons' futures – or in the case of dementia, not even in the other person's present. Without a commonly shared present, the writers felt that they would not have a shared future with their loved ones – or, at least, that the future would need to be reconstructed, as in the case of grandchildren. It was as if the participants feared that the forced present would continue past their loved ones' memories, making the participants disappear from other people's minds. In a way, the participants and their loved ones were living in silos – separate forced presents without embodied interactions between them.

However, the participants also attempted to make sense of the present by hoping for a better future. As Flaherty and Fine (2001: 158) argued when analysing Mead's philosophy, a self-conscious society 'can take an interpretive moment during a collectively defined specious present to select one of many possible directions for social development':

I'm 78, my wife is 77 years old, and our household is in order. We have lived with very little in our childhood, and during our adulthood, we have been quite orderly and economical. The coronavirus will shadow the rest of our lives in some way or another. The bigger threat is, however, climate change. We need to battle these two risk factors all over the world, so I believe that we will find solutions. But our former lifestyle is only a memory now. Humankind needs to take a new approach to economic growth, consumption, collaboration and interaction, perhaps we'll be able to end all wars that are maintained because of religion. (Male, 78 years old)

I believe that [this] does good in a hectic world. One gets to think their own thoughts in peace. We can enjoy each other and children [can enjoy being with] their parents. I like that the climate is purified of pollution and the noise level gets lower ... Corona brings new possibilities. The digital leap, distant work and nature will find their places in people's lives. People will notice that nothing in human life is self-evident. People will see that things can revolutionise the whole world in a few months. People will learn to live in the moment. Life is here and now. That's something that young people haven't understood. I believe that the world will be a better place after the corona. (Female, 72 years old)

In the specious present of crisis, deaths, social isolation and lockdowns, the participants pondered whether a better future could be possible. Perhaps without the crisis, some of the participants would not have been so hopeful in their wishes for

solutions that would end wars and climate change. As the pandemic stopped everything, for some of the participants this appeared like a turning point: now, it was possible to consider our current situation and change course for the future. As the third quotation above showed, if things can be revolutionised in a few months, does that not mean that we can solve all problems that threaten the world?

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to analyse how older people perceived time during the self-isolation period by looking at the descriptions of the present, the past and the future in the letters collected during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used Mead's nonlinear theory of time to understand how older people made sense of the pandemic time, how their temporal perceptions altered and what consequences these changes had on their everyday lives. Furthermore, the nonlinear theory of time helped us understand the intertwined nature of time, which became evident when the perception of time was forcibly in the present. Given that people tend to interpret new, significant events according to a framework that helps them maintain a continuous personal biography (Maines *et al.*, 1983), we scrutinised the ways in which older people made sense of the pandemic to establish continuity in their lives.

Our research shows that older people searched for meanings of the forced present in the personal and collective past. Regarding continuity, some hoped for a better future, while others feared having no future at all. It seems evident that the pandemic altered older people's time perception in many ways, but, most importantly, it increased their focus on the present by making them feel that they needed to stay up to date with the fluctuating pandemic situation. However, the present was not extended (Nowotny, 1994) in the sense that its density and accelerated pace brought the future closer; rather, it became an unending present full of 'nothingness' (Scott, 2017; Leinonen, 2022). Thus, for some participants, the pandemic made their present eventless and monotonous, as if they were imprisoned without knowing how long their sentences would be.

According to Mead (1932), reality exists in the present. By analysing temporalities of the pandemic as forced present, we could show how the participants' perceptions of time altered and how the temporality of the pandemic forced them to look for meaning in their personal and collective pasts to cope with social isolation. For some, the past eased their anxieties about the situation, but this was not the complete story, as others felt that they were forced to relive the hardships they had encountered in the past. Furthermore, the pandemic pushed the future and its possibilities beyond confident imagination, as if the future would be nothing more than an endless extension of the present.

Moreover, our research showed that social isolation measures put older people in a highly precarious situation. Evidently, this measure, directed exclusively at older people, was ageist in the sense that it took away older persons' abilities to plan and foresee their futures. The fact that all persons over 70 years of age were placed in the same category diminished their temporal agency, as if a person over a certain age could not decide how to live compared to a person in their fifties. Even though the reasoning behind the restrictions – namely that older people were at greater risk of

having a more severe infection – was understandable at the beginning of the pandemic, this does not remove the fact that time was, in a sense, stolen from older people. In Finland, the age-specific restriction measures were largely lifted in June 2020, after which all further restrictions concerned everyone. This highlights the ambivalent nature of restriction measures targeted only to certain age groups. As it has been stated by Vasara *et al.* (2023), ageist, ableist and paternalistic views on older people have been posed during the pandemic in different countries. On one hand, there has been an emphasis on dependency and vulnerability of older people in pandemic-related policies around the world; on the other hand, older people have been seen as resilient, ever-coping individuals – as representatives of successful ageing and the third age (Higgs and Gilleard, 2014; Naughton *et al.*, 2021; Vasara *et al.*, 2023). Both of these views put older people in the same homogeneous category which easily leads to either over-protection or lack of understanding of vulnerable positions and situations. These contrasting views were also present in our findings as those writers in their seventies were more inclined to resist the restrictions than the writers in their eighties and nineties (Leinonen, 2022). In a sense, for the participants in their seventies, ageism towards them was seen as putting them into the category of ‘oldhood’ which in itself is a form of ageism towards people ‘who are really old’.

In this article, we do not argue that older people were prevented from exercising their temporal agency completely. In fact, many participants wrote about the new ways in which they restructured their daily lives according to the restrictions, even claiming that they were enjoying their new ways of living (*see also e.g.* Tiilikainen *et al.*, 2021; Leinonen, 2022). However, we argue that there is a lack of understanding regarding the temporality of the pandemic as a forced present, which affected (and continues to affect) millions of people around the world.

Furthermore, we believe that the concept of the forced present can be beneficial for understanding temporal inequalities. For instance, for younger people, in temporal sense, decision-making was in their hands because they could choose how to spend their time – according to recommendations, of course. However, even though they were not binding, the government’s recommendations and restrictions for older persons were stricter. Due to these age-related restrictions, older people could not manage their time in a similar manner as others. It seems that the time of older people is not as important as that of others, despite the fact that it is the only time they have left in their lives. During COVID-19, because of the visiting restrictions, many older people died without their relatives by their side. To force older people to live in the present, and sometimes without contact with their loved ones, meant that the quality of their time was diminished, particularly due to the limited quantity of time they possessed. In the end, the pandemic did not slow down the acceleration of our times – instead, it left many people behind.

Overall, it is important to note that the participants of this study are mainly older people who are relatively healthy, able and willing to participate in such a study, and whose lives seemed to be at least relatively active. This means that we cannot claim that the empirical results of this study concern every older person in Finland. The situation of older people in care homes, especially those of the oldest and most frail, was certainly more difficult, as shown, for instance, in the study of Paananen *et al.* (2021). Thus, we can assume that those people in the most

vulnerable situation could not participate in this study. However, we see that the concept of forced present could also be utilised in analysing their temporal experiences. Further research is certainly needed on the temporalities of 'oldhood' and the ways time becomes a source of inequality.

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