

## *Academic essay: editing*

### *Original*

The present essay will provide a critical evaluation of Elias's assertion that dying has become a 'lonely' experience. This essay will initially consider Elias's claim in an attempt to highlight several aspects of dying as a lonely experience. The essay will then put forward the argument that Elias's view is limited to industrialised countries; where individualistic lifestyles make for a lonely life and thus a lonely death. Attention will then focus on arguments for and against dying as a lonely experience in individualistic industrialised and collectivist traditional countries, with particular reference to Tönnies' concepts of 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft'. Finally, a summary of the arguments for and against Elias's assertion in relation to Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft, individualism and collectivism will be evaluated.

Elias (1985) puts forward the controversial claim that dying has become a lonely experience; stating that without intention the older people become the frequency of contact with family and friends declines, as does the closeness of the relationships. Factors such as industrialisation, new living conditions, urbanisation and modernisation have further contributed to this isolated and independent living style that has been adopted in highly developed societies; family units are smaller and the drive for personal wealth increases. This essay argues that lifestyles such as this are self-interested and lonely; therefore one's death will be mirrored by the life one has lived.

Elias highlights the early isolation of the dying particularly in modern and advanced societies, 'Never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today in these societies, and never in social conditions so much fostering solitude' (1985: 85). One might suggest that such conditions exist due to technological advances and medicalisation; the fight to prolong life and deny our impending deaths. Furthermore, Elias argues that members of modern and complex societies have an inner self that is separate to the external world, resulting in one reflecting genuine feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation. Such persons are present in highly developed societies where particularly high individualisation exists (Elias, 1985). Elias lived and worked in Europe and his assertion is somewhat limited in that it is based upon individualistic, industrialised societies of which he was familiar with and he has not examined collectivist, traditional societies.

Factors such as societies' denial of death, medicalisation and religion are acknowledged as aspects contributing to the loneliness of one's death. However this essay will further examine this assertion in terms of individualistic industrialised societies and collectivist traditional with particular reference to Tönnies's sociological concepts of 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft.' The concepts represent differences in social relationships and societies. Gemeinschaft refers to 'community' and within that a "unity of will" (Tönnies, 1967); where the individuals have common beliefs regarding behaviour and responsibilities to one another and the community as a whole. Gemeinschaft is comparable to collectivist pre-industrialised rural communities, characterised by strong personal relationships, strong families and

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Elias's assertion in *The Loneliness of Dying* (1985) has become a central tenet in our understanding of death: its loneliness. Whereas most discussion tends towards how or why it has become lonely, this essay will provide a critical evaluation of Elias's notion in different cultures. Initially, it will explore his original claim, to highlight several aspects of dying as a lonely experience. It will then offer the argument that his view is limited to industrialised countries where individualistic lifestyles make for lonely lives and thus lonely deaths. Arguments for and against dying as a lonely experience will be compared in two settings – in individualistic industrialised countries and in collectivist traditional countries – with particular reference to Tönnies's concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

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In 1985, Elias puts forward his then controversial claim that dying has become a lonely experience; that without intention, the older people become the less contact they have with family and friends and the less intimate these relationships. In highly developed societies, an isolated and independent living style is already in place, resulting from industrialisation, new living conditions, urbanisation and modernisation. In turn, family units become smaller and the drive for personal wealth increases. This essay argues that such lifestyles are already self-interested and lonely; one's death, therefore, will mirror one's life.

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Elias highlights the early isolation of the dying, particularly in modern and advanced societies; 'Never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today in these societies, and never in social conditions so much fostering solitude.' (1985: 85) He sees these technological advances and medicalisation primarily in terms of isolation, but one could equally view them positively, not as silencing death but as fighting to prolong life and refuse the impending death. He sees such deaths through the lens of loneliness because that is how he views his society from the start. Members of modern and complex societies, he argues, have an inner self that is separate to the external world, resulting in one's reflecting genuine feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation. Such persons are more common in highly developed societies where particularly high individualisation exists (Elias, 1985) – his own society exactly, Elias lived and worked in Europe. His assertion is based upon and limited to the individualistic, industrialised societies with which he was familiar, ignoring collectivist, traditional societies.

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Nevertheless, in any society, the denial of death, medicalisation and loss of religion must be acknowledged as aspects contributing to the loneliness of one's death. *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* offer a more useful distinction between individualistic industrialised and collectivist traditional societies. Tönnies's two sociological concepts represent differences in social relationships and societies. *Gemeinschaft* refers to 'community' and within that a 'unity of will' (Tönnies, 1967); individuals have common beliefs regarding behaviour and responsibilities to one another and the community as a whole. *Gemeinschaft* is comparable to collectivist pre-industrialised rural communities, characterised by strong personal relationships, strong families and

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# MEGAN KERR

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## *Edited – final*

Elias's assertion in *The Loneliness of Dying* (1985) has become a central tenet in our understanding of death: its loneliness. Whereas most discussion tends towards how or why it has become lonely, this essay will provide a critical evaluation of Elias's notion in different cultures. Initially, it will explore his original claim, to highlight several aspects of dying as a lonely experience. It will then offer the argument that his view is limited to industrialised countries where individualistic lifestyles make for lonely lives and thus lonely deaths. Arguments for and against dying as a lonely experience will be compared in two settings – in individualistic industrialised countries and in collectivist traditional countries – with particular reference to Tönnies's concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

In 1985, Elias puts forward his then-controversial claim that dying has become a lonely experience: that without intention, the older people become, the less contact they have with family and friends and the less intimate these relationships. In highly developed societies, an isolated and independent living style is already in place, resulting from industrialisation, new living conditions, urbanisation and modernisation. In turn, family units become smaller and the drive for personal wealth increases. This essay argues that such lifestyles are already self-interested and lonely; one's death, therefore, will mirror one's life.

Elias highlights the early isolation of the dying, particularly in modern and advanced societies: 'Never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today in these societies, and never in social conditions so much fostering solitude.' (1985: 85) He sees these technological advances and medicalisation primarily in terms of isolation, but one could equally view them positively, not as silencing death but as fighting to prolong life and refuse the impending death. He sees such deaths through the lens of loneliness because that is how he views his society from the start. Members of modern and complex societies, he argues, have an inner self that is separate to the external world, resulting in one's reflecting genuine feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation. Such persons are more common in highly developed societies where particularly high individualisation exists (Elias, 1985) – his own society exactly. Elias lived and worked in Europe. His assertion is based upon and limited to the individualistic, industrialised societies with which he was familiar, ignoring collectivist, traditional societies.

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