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Cross-national Comparisons of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Introduction and Overview

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RÉSUMÉ
Cet article sert d'introduction à un volume spécial sur la recherche en matière d'isolement social et de solitude chez les personnes âgées. L'auteur y aborde certains concepts-clés et nous donne un bref aperçu des articles se trouvant dans le volume.

ABSTRACT
This article provides an introduction to the special volume on research related to issues of social isolation and loneliness for older people. It discusses some key concepts and provides a brief overview of the articles included in the volume.

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More than 40 per cent of the population of the European Union feel that loneliness is one of the two main problems of older people, and 44 per cent of the European population aged 65 and over put loneliness first, as the main problem for older adults (Walker, 1993). Loneliness is frequently described as a universal experience among older adults – in particular, among the very old and oldest-old persons – in most cultures and regions of the world. But is this true? In this special issue, research into loneliness in different countries and regions, including cross-national research, is presented. The central question addressed is, Is loneliness universal among older adults? If the answer is no, what are the main determinants affecting loneliness or changes in loneliness among older people, given the specific characteristics of their social situation and environment? The empirical research presented here, from Canada and several countries in Europe, shows a wide variation among lonely and not-lonely older adults. Differences are demonstrated among adults: Some, over long periods of observation, continue to be not lonely; others start to be lonely after experiencing certain life events; still others recover from loneliness. Determinants of loneliness show parallels in

diverse settings and cultures, although the cross-national data also reveal important differences among regions and cultures.

In investigating loneliness, it is important to differentiate this phenomenon from social isolation. *Loneliness* is characterized by the unpleasant feeling of lacking certain relationships or missing a certain level of quality in one's contacts with other people. Loneliness concerns the manner in which individuals perceive, experience, and evaluate the lack of communication with other people. *Social isolation* concerns the objective characteristics of the situation individuals are confronted with and refers to shortcomings in the size of their network of social relationships. The interrelationship between loneliness and social isolation is a complex one.

Loneliness, Social Isolation, and the Relationship between Them

In the social sciences, the oldest publication about loneliness is *Über die Einsamkeit* (Zimmermann, 1785–1786). More recent attention to the concept of loneliness began in the 1950s and 1960s, with publications by Fromm Reichman (1959). Perlman and Peplau (1981, p. 31) formulated a definition of loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively". A definition that explicitly takes into account the standards that are central to the evaluation process leading to loneliness is the following: "Loneliness is a situation ... in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than is considered desirable or admissible, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realised" (de Jong Gierveld, 1987, p. 120). In both definitions, loneliness is considered to be the experience of negative feelings about missing relationships and occurs in individuals of all ages. The opposite of loneliness is belonging or embeddedness.

Social isolation, in contrast, has to do with the objective characteristics of a situation and refers to the absence of relationships with other people. The central question in this context is, To what extent is the individual alone? The continuum of objective social isolation puts social isolation at the one extreme and social participation at the other end.

Although loneliness is an individual's subjective evaluation of her/his situation, degree of loneliness has a rather weak connection to the characteristics of the objective social situation. Loneliness is one of the possible outcomes of the evaluation of a situation consisting of a small number of relationships. But socially isolated persons are not necessarily lonely, and lonely persons are not necessarily socially isolated (in objective terms). Depending on the social situation and on personal characteristics, some persons with a small number of social contacts consider themselves lonely, while others, with the same number of social contacts, feel well and sufficiently embedded. The latter may also be true of people who prefer to be alone and who opt for privacy as a means to avoid undesired social contacts and relationships.

Types of Loneliness

In principle, loneliness is considered to be temporary. Some philosophers, however, are convinced that loneliness and the struggle for intimacy are the essence of human existence and, as such, are permanent and universal experiences (Mijuskovic, 1996).

Weiss (1973) differentiated between emotional and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness, stemming from the absence of an intimate figure (e.g., a partner or best friend), is common directly after being widowed or divorced and is characterized by feelings of emptiness and forlornness. Sometimes emotional loneliness is related to depression. Social loneliness is related to the absence of a broad network of friends and others. Young, stay-at-home wives who have recently moved to a new area frequently report social loneliness. Their husbands, however intimate, cannot fill the felt gap left by the absence of a group of friends and others with whom to share time and common interests.

Recently, this differentiation between social and emotional loneliness has received increased attention, and researchers have used the two types of loneliness to further differentiate among lonely persons and among the different determinants that lie behind their loneliness (Dugan & Kivett, 1994; Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & van Duijn, 2001; van Tilburg, Havens, & de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

Determinants of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Main Research Findings

The intensity of loneliness, as a subjective evaluation of the absence of relationships or of the inadequate quality of relationships in comparison with the relationships desired, is largely dependent on the prevailing (social) standards as to what constitutes an optimal network of relationships. Norms for familial functioning, filial support for older women and men, and patterns of safeguarding against loneliness, however, may differ among countries and regions (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 1999; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; van Tilburg et al., 2004). Participation in and commitment to specific *integrating or mediating structures* can

provide the individual members of society with a more or less solid basis of integration and embeddedness.

Marital and Partner Status

Marital and partner status are among the major integrating structures in society. Persons with a partner bond, married as well as non-married, are happier, on average, than persons without a partner bond and are better protected from unhappiness and loneliness (Wenger, Davies, Shahtahmasebi, & Scott, 1996). Those who remain alone after the death of a partner or after divorce are specifically at risk of loneliness because an important element of the social network is missing and also because a partner is one determinant of the size and broader composition of the network of both partners (Dykstra, 1995; Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Pinquart & Sörenson, 2001). The greater likelihood that older women will be confronted with living in a one-person household increases their risk of suffering from loneliness, even though women are often seen to be more advantaged in maintaining interpersonal relationships. Remarriage and starting other types of new partner relationships may improve the situation of formerly married persons to a certain extent. But, as the research by Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld (2004) shows, partner *history* has an effect on loneliness, in addition to the effects of current partner status.

Kin Relationships

Children are the first and most important people to step in when the older parent is considered to be in *need of particular help*, defined as experiencing crisis events such as widowhood (Cicirelli, 2000; Eggebeen & Adam, 1998). Hagestad (1998) underlines the importance of communication within the family and maintaining continuity across life phases to strengthen the social embeddedness of young, as well as older, family members; where this is done, the risk of intense loneliness may be alleviated.

Non-kin Relationships

Non-kin relationships have a function in the building and maintaining of a heterogeneous social network. The exchange of interests with friends, colleagues, and other non-relatives can provide individuals with feelings of belongingness (Connidis & Davies, 1990; Wagner, Schütze, & Lang, 1999). Participation in organized religion, participation in the labour market, and involvement in volunteer work can provide individuals with the benefits of belonging to a set of interlocking social structures. Moreover, the possibility of starting new friendships through these formal organizations also needs to be considered.

Size and Overall Composition of the Network

Being involved in a network of intimate and broader relationships will provide the individual with feelings of belongingness and protection against loneliness. Ideally, the network is composed of a partner, kin as well as non-kin members, younger and older persons, men and women, and weakly and strongly supportive bonds, in order to provide the individual with a diversity of relational outcomes. Research (Dykstra, 1990) has shown that those older adults who are not exclusively dependent on their children because help is available from other sources as well have the highest levels of well-being and the lowest levels of loneliness. The larger the number of relationships and the more heterogeneous the network (given that the quality and content of the contacts are satisfactory), the more likely the person's desires for exchange of emotional and social support will be met and feelings of embeddedness be satisfactory, and the less likely it is that older adults will experience loneliness.

Loneliness and Social Isolation from a Cross-national Perspective: An Overview of the Special Issue

The great variety in the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation among older adults is clearly stated throughout the different contributions to this issue. The characteristics of the older segment of the population which have changed in the second half of the twentieth century – for example, the sharp increase in longevity and in the incidence of one- and two-person households among those aged 60 and over – have not led to universal loneliness among older adults. Values and standards and the nature of family and non-family relationships have been changing at the same time. Older adults seek autonomy and prefer to live (residentially and financially) independently for as long as possible; at the same time, they do appreciate communications with children, siblings, and others. In other words, they seek what Rosenmayr (1983) called "intimacy at a distance."

Havens, Hall, Sylvestre, and Jivan clearly attest that there is no evidence to support the claim that loneliness is a universal phenomenon among older adults. The experience of loneliness proved to vary substantially among older persons interviewed in a large-scale panel survey in Manitoba. Special attention was given to factors that predict both social isolation and loneliness for rural and urban older adults. While health and social factors were found to predict both situations, different factors predicted the two different outcomes and the factors that predicted each outcome were different for rural and urban older adults.

Research in Finland (Jylhä) has shown the importance of follow-up research to identify self-reported loneliness among older adults over time: A remarkable proportion "recovered" from loneliness; others reported loneliness starting at a later moment in their lives (following certain life events –so-called "incident" loneliness). About half of the respondents reported that they did not feel lonely at any one of the measuring times, and a relatively small proportion was lonely continuously over the entire 20-year research period.

Wenger and Burholt examined, quantitatively and qualitatively, the loneliness of survivors out of a group of 500 adults in rural Wales interviewed initially in 1979 and followed up to five times. Of the survivors, aged 85 to 101 years in 1995, some exhibited fluctuating patterns, while a significant minority was not lonely and not socially isolated at any measuring time. All of them had lived in the same area for years and had locally integrated support networks. However, the prevalence of loneliness also increased with advancing age, and by 1995 more than half of the survivors were assessed as at least moderately lonely.

In each of the research projects mentioned thus far, deteriorating health and some combination of being widowed, female, and living alone were identified as being among the main determinants or life events affecting the risk of becoming lonely in later life. So, loneliness does increase with age, but not because of age per se (Jylhä, 2004). In the contributions of Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld and of van Tilburg et al., the researchers offer a new perspective on loneliness by explicitly differentiating between emotional and social loneliness, in addition to exploring social isolation characteristics.

Based on the notion that men and women have asymmetric relationship needs and capacities and follow different pathways through marital and partner history, Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld examined loneliness outcomes for older adults in the Netherlands. Among men, marital history and current partner status offered the best explanation for being emotionally lonely or not lonely. Marital history and the functioning of the wider circle of relationships accounted for differences in emotional loneliness among women. Network size and supportive exchanges were inversely associated with social isolation for both men and women.

Using the same research design and loneliness-measuring instrument and taking into account differential item functioning, van Tilburg et al. compared older adults in Canada (Manitoba), the Netherlands, and Italy (Tuscany) to assess cross-cultural differences in the levels and determinants of emotional and social loneliness. Location did matter in that the intensity of loneliness differed; Manitobans were high on emotional loneliness and the Tuscans were high on social loneliness. The determinants were nearly the same across the three locations, with one exception: in the Netherlands the presence of a partner protected against loneliness to a higher degree than in Manitoba or Tuscany.

The final contribution, by Perlman, is the summarizing and concluding overview of the articles and reflects in depth on the central question: Is loneliness a universal experience for older adults? It is appropriate to close this introductory section by quoting Perlman's concluding remarks:

> [L]oneliness occurs in all, or virtually all, cultures. Nonetheless, I suspect that loneliness is significantly influenced by cultural factors … [They] shape loneliness's prevalence, intensity, and antecedents; perhaps culture even shapes the very nature of the phenomenon itself. In this sense, loneliness is not universal; it is culture bound.

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