

European and Canadian Studies of Loneliness among Seniors

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Abstract:

This article provides a commentary on a set of five other articles reporting European and Canadian studies of loneliness among seniors. It places those works involving Canadian, Dutch, Finnish, and Welsh samples in the larger context of research on loneliness; offers reflections on the methods and findings reported in the articles; and addresses the question, Is loneliness universal? Points of similarity in the articles are identified and possible ways of reconciling discrepant findings regarding age trends and gender differences are put forward. A discrepancy model of loneliness is used as a key framework for explaining several points, including why objective social isolation and loneliness don't always go together.

L'auteur apporte ses commentaires sur cinq articles décrivant des études sur la solitude chez les personnes âgées effectuées en Europe et au Canada. Il examine ces travaux (qui portent sur des échantillons canadiens, hollandais, finlandais et gallois) sous l'angle élargi de la recherche sur la solitude; il analyse les méthodes et conclusions présentées dans les articles et répond à la question: La solitude est-elle universelle? Il note les similitudes entre les divers articles et propose des façons de rapprocher les conclusions divergentes liées à l'âge et aux différences entre les sexes. Il utilise comme cadre de référence un modèle fondé sur le décalage (*discrepancy model*) pour expliquer plusieurs points, notamment pourquoi l'isolement social objectif et la solitude ne vont pas toujours de pair.

Keywords: aging | loneliness | social isolation | age | gender | cross-cultural differences | seniors | vieillissement | solitude | isolement social | âge | sexe | différences transculturelles | personnes âgées

Article:

With national surveys finding that over a quarter of North Americans report having felt lonely or remote from others in the past few weeks, loneliness is a widespread phenomenon (see Weiss, 1973, p. 23). Many consider it to be one of the main problems that older adults face. European and North American countries have seen changes in age structures, child bearing, and marital

patterns that are likely to produce a steady increase in the twenty-first century in the number of older people who lack spouses or children. For those subscribing to the debatable view that being alone equals being lonely (Peplau, Bikson, Rook, & Goodchilds, 1982; for more recent illustrative evidence, see de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 1995), such trends may prompt worries that loneliness will increase over the coming years. Whatever its future prevalence, loneliness has clearly been associated with a variety of other problems, including poor mental and physical health (Perlman & Russell, 2004), memory deficits (Bazargan & Barbre, 1992), sleep disturbances (Cacioppo et al., 2002), and the like.

It may seem surprising from current perspectives, but until the 1970s loneliness was largely ignored by social scientists. In the 1970s there were at least two noteworthy developments that gave impetus to the research in the area. First, Weiss (1973) published his *Loneliness* book, which became a classic in the field. He vividly described the phenomenon of loneliness, distinguishing between two types: *social* and *emotional*. He associated these respectively with the absence of an engaging social network, such as is provided by friends and like-minded members of community groups, and the absence of a close emotional attachment, such as is provided by a spouse. Second, soon after this, researchers at UCLA and in the Netherlands developed short scales to measure loneliness (de Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985; Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978; Russell, 1996). These developments were then followed by the initiation of a set of large-scale, longitudinal studies of loneliness among representative samples of seniors in Europe and Canada. The fruits of those studies are now being harvested, as was evident in the special symposium held at the 2001 Congress of the International Association on Gerontology, from which emerged this special issue on social isolation and loneliness among seniors. Loneliness has gradually become an important topic in social science research.

In reflecting on the articles in this special issue, I will address four topics. First, I place the articles in perspective in terms of the broader loneliness literature. Second, I comment briefly on methodological features of the studies. Third, I reflect on four aspects of the articles' empirical findings, those pertaining to objective isolation versus loneliness, gender, age, and mortality. Finally, I want to address what the symposium's convener, Betty Havens (2001), originally posed to the authors as a central concern; namely, the question, Is loneliness a universal experience for older adults?

The Place of European and Canadian Studies in the Loneliness Literature

Sippola and Bukowski (1999) and others have contended that much of the loneliness research done in the late twentieth century was "based on concepts and studies from the literature on adult *social psychology* [italics added]" (p. 282). A social psychological approach most frequently turns out to mean examining college sophomores (Sears, 1986), without regard to lifespan issues. This is undoubtedly a fair characterization of the dominant trend in the loneliness literature. A check of the American Psychological Association's PsycINFO bibliographic database for the period 1996 to June 2003, using the title word *loneliness*, shows over twice as many articles discussing adolescents and young adults as those discussing adults 65 and over. Nonetheless, as a section on development in Peplau and Perlman's (1982) edited volume testifies, developmental issues have received at least some attention. In 1978 the Canadian journal *Essence* published a special issue on loneliness among seniors (Wood, 1978). Recently,

important work was published on loneliness among children and adolescents (see Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). The articles in this symposium, although not balancing the scales completely, do help to rectify a bias in the extant literature by focusing attention again on older adults.

The contributors to this special issue work in community or public health, demography, and sociology units. This undoubtedly influences the types of variables they include in their studies. Whereas social psychologists often examine such influences as personality traits and attributions, the researchers in this collection focus more on social networks, participant demographic characteristics, marital histories, functional capacity, and the like.

Besides considering authors' disciplinary affiliations, a complementary way of situating the current set of articles is to compare the topics they address with the topics covered in the larger literature on loneliness. In her opening remarks at the Vancouver symposium, de Jong Gierveld (2001) captured many of the topics classically of concern to loneliness researchers. She organized her review in terms of definitions, types of loneliness, networks, determinants, and coping. She also alluded to measuring instruments, prevalence, theoretical perspectives, and treatments for loneliness. Other recent reviews of the loneliness literature (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Jones & Hebb, 2003) have covered such additional topics as developmental perspectives, social cognition, psychopathology, and special populations (e.g., immigrants). The articles in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging* ignore certain facets of loneliness (e.g., social cognition, psychopathology, and clinical interventions to help people overcome loneliness), but they deepen knowledge concerning several of the classic questions about loneliness (e.g., prevalence; types of loneliness; determinants, including social networks; etc.).

One of the distinctive features of the studies reported in the current set of articles is their attention to the longitudinal course of loneliness. Such studies are advantageous because they avoid the difficulty in cross-sectional studies of knowing whether age differences reflect the process of aging or the different historical periods in which the various age groups grew up. Longitudinal studies also permit investigating continuity and change over time and exploring what predicts changes.

There have been a few longitudinal investigations of students entering university (Cutrona, 1982; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985) and of older adults (Dykstra, 2000; Ehrhorn & Smith, 2001; Olsen, Olsen, Gunner-Svensson, & Waldstrom, 1991; Russell, Cutrona, de la Mora, & Wallace, 1997; Russell, Cutrona, & Hessling, 1998; Russell & Cutrona, 1985). Studies on late adolescents have examined their reactions to life transitions, such as going away to university. The earlier studies on older adults usually covered shorter periods of time and assessed loneliness at the beginning of the study as a predictor of other, later outcomes. The long-term follow-up of participants is costly and requires considerable perseverance. It is wonderful to now have Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, American, and Welsh longitudinal studies. As reported in this issue (Wenger & Burholt, 2004; Jylhä, 2004), the data from two of these studies were analysed to track the loneliness of individuals for up to 20 years, thus shedding light on the stability of loneliness over an extensive period of time.

Methods

The authors of this collection of articles are to be complimented for the methodological strengths of their work, strengths such as the longitudinal designs (already mentioned); large-scale, representative samples; common variables; and careful item analyses. In the area of close-relationships research, such broad, representative samples are uncommon. The measurement of the same variables in separate studies conducted in different countries offers an unusual opportunity for cross-national comparisons. Had these studies been originally designed for comparative purposes, more might have been done to select cultures that differed in systematic ways on variables presumed to have a theoretical relationship with loneliness. Nonetheless, the current authors have made a start. Van Tilburg, Havens, and de Jong Gierveld (2004) performed differential item functioning (DIF) analysis to determine whether the items used to measure loneliness were culturally bound. Such analyses are exemplary and hopefully will become more widespread in research on ethnicity and culture.

Weiss's (1973) social-versus-emotional distinction mentioned earlier has been a cornerstone of the analysis of loneliness, yet meta-analyses show that the vast majority of empirical studies use scales that assess a generic form of loneliness, without endeavouring to measure its different varieties (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Thus, it is gratifying to see the social-versus- emotional distinction being further examined in the current symposium of the *Canadian Journal on Aging*. Both van Tilburg, Havens, and de Jong Gierveld (2004) and Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld (2004) base their analyses of social and emotional loneliness on studies using de Jong Gierveld's scale (de Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985). Efforts to assess these concepts in both North American and European research, however, have met with challenges.

In the case of de Jong Gierveld's scale, early analyses found ambiguous evidence regarding its unidimensionality, leading de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis (1985) to conclude that "there were no theoretical grounds for bidimensionality" (p. 295). They considered that what evidence did exist of a second dimension was possibly due to a methodological artefact in participants' responses, induced by the different wording of the items in the two subscales. Whereas the items on the emotional loneliness scale are all phrased negatively, those on the social loneliness scale are all phrased positively.

Another early concern in trying to use the de Jong Gierveld scale to measure both emotional and social loneliness was the content of the items. Weiss believed that emotional loneliness is linked to an absence of close ties, whereas social loneliness is linked to the absence of a broader network of relationships. It has been argued that items such as "There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems" are ambiguous, in that it is not clear whether they refer to the absence of a close bond or the absence of a broader network of relationships. Thus, even if data- reduction techniques empirically locate (or suggest dropping) them, they are *conceptually* difficult to place on either the social or the emotional subscale.

Nonetheless, later analyses (van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & van Duijn, 2001) showed two sets of items that each correlated with external variables (e.g., marital status, network characteristics) in a theoretically meaningful way. Van Baarsen et al. claimed that the emotional items (see van Tilburg, Havens, & de Jong Gierveld, 2004, Table 2) all refer to qualitative aspects of relationships, whereas the social items all refer to quantitative aspects. They contended that, while the phrasing of the emotional items (words such as "feel", "miss", and "experience")

describes the feeling of being emotionally isolated, the phrasing of the social items (words such as "plenty of people", "my friends", or "always someone") describes the feeling that one can count on others for help and support. Although I believe the current versions of the emotional and social loneliness scales have utility, I hope that in the future researchers will refine these measures by adding theoretically derived items that are conceptually anchored in Weiss's distinction.

Reflections on Selected Findings

Objective Social Isolation versus the Subjective Experience of Loneliness

One of the key concerns in this collection of articles is the relationship between objective social isolation and the subjective experience of loneliness. As de Jong Gierveld (2001) noted in her introductory remarks for the Vancouver symposium, these two constructs are imperfectly connected. The articles in this collection further support that view. For instance, Manitobans are as likely as Dutch and Tuscan participants to be living with a partner, yet Manitobans are more likely to be emotionally lonely (see van Tilburg, Havens, & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). Wenger and Burholt (2004) find differences (as well some similarities) in the predictors of isolation and loneliness. From the discrepancy perspective on loneliness (see, e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1998) shown in Figure 1, these findings are not surprising. Central to this perspective is the idea that loneliness does not stem solely from objective levels of social contact. Instead, it results from a discrepancy between the social relationships someone needs (or desires) and the relationships s/he actually has. Predisposing and precipitating events can raise or lower desired levels of social contact in ways that increase or decrease loneliness, without any change in a person's actual social relationships. Furthermore, not everyone perceives and interprets the mismatch in exactly the same way. Instead, people vary in the degree to which they engage in cognitive processes such as causal attributions, social comparisons, or perceiving they have control over events in their lives. These cognitive processes can moderate how intensely people react to their lack of social contact and support.

Figure 1 Omitted

The discrepancy model helps explain both why some people can be alone for long periods of time without feeling lonely and others can feel lonely when surrounded by others. Thus, for example, objectively isolated individuals can avoid feeling lonely if their desired levels of social contact are low, if they themselves decided to be solitary, and/or if they attribute their isolation to external forces beyond their own control. Individuals surrounded by others can feel lonely if they have unusually high levels of desired social contact or if the people around them fail in offering key relational provisions, such as attachment, reliable alliance, and reassurance of worth. In the loneliness literature, as in the study of social support, the perceived quality of relationships and the relational provisions they offer appears to be more important than objective measures of the presence or absence of social ties (Cutrona, 1982; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1992).

Gender Differences in Loneliness

Another concern for most authors in this collection of articles is gender (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Jylhä, 2004; van Tilburg, Havens, & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Havens, Hall, Sylvestre, & Jivan, 2004). Jylhä found that women were more likely to describe themselves as "lonely" than were men. Using scales that avoid the word loneliness, the other contributors to this collection generally found small and/or complex gender effects. Borys and Perlman's (1985) analysis of gender differences in loneliness helps shed light on these divergent results. In a meta-analysis of past investigations, they found that if indices directly asked respondents whether they were lonely, women reported more loneliness. On the UCLA scale, in which the word loneliness is never used, results were mixed, with a few studies showing males scoring higher on loneliness than females. In an experimental study having participants rate a prototypical lonely person, Borys and Perlman found that judges evaluated the prototypical lonely person more harshly if the person was identified as a male. Thus, the stigma of being lonely for men appears to be greater than it is for women and may make men hesitant to admit loneliness. Given the methods Jylhä used, the results of the study are what Borys and Perlman's analysis suggests they should be.

Age Differences in Loneliness

Three studies in this collection examine age differences in loneliness. Jylhä (2004) presents evidence, from both longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses employing a single-item measure, that loneliness increases with age. Using a longitudinal design with a smaller sample of community-living seniors ($N=47$), Wenger and Burholt (2004) also found an age-related increase in loneliness. In cross-sectional analyses, van Tilburg, Havens, and de Jong Gierveld (2004) found that emotional, but not social, loneliness increased with age. When the two teams with larger samples did multivariate analyses, the impact of age was less pronounced, with age becoming a non-significant factor in Jylhä's study.

In 1991 a review of earlier evidence on age differences in loneliness found somewhat mixed results among older adults (see Perlman, 1991): Some studies showed increases in loneliness with age; others showed no effect. A closer examination of projects with data on age differences in loneliness is warranted to determine why there are discrepancies in the pattern of results among cross-sectional studies and between longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Perhaps a useful first step would be to perform a meta-analysis of data sets to establish reliable patterns of the age changes needing explanation. Earlier analyses by Townsend (1968) suggested that the proportion of widowed and incapacitated persons in older sub-groups may help explain the variability of mean levels of loneliness found in samples of respondents aged 80 and over. Thus, in studies where the proportion of widowed or incapacitated participants increases substantially with age, the age-related increase in loneliness should be sharper than in studies where the oldest old are mainly married and relatively healthy. This view complements that of Jylhä, who concludes that, "loneliness increases with age, but not because of age per se, but because of increasing disability and weakening social integration" (2004, p. 166).

If this line of analysis is valid, it still leaves the mystery of van Tilburg, Havens, and de Jong Gierveld's finding of an age-related increase in emotional, but not social, loneliness. From Weiss's (1973) perspective, a key to understanding this measure-specific pattern might be differential rates of weakening in different network sectors, particularly a decline in attachment-type bonds as opposed to community ties. If Carstensen's model is correct, however, such a

pattern is unlikely (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), as it is community ties, she maintains, not intimate bonds, that aging adults give up. From a discrepancy- type perspective, an increase in emotional, but not social, loneliness could be explained in terms of changes in the gaps between desired and achieved social contact in different network sectors. A pattern of parallel declines in desired and achieved social contact, with a sharper decline in achieved than in desired emotional ties, would account for the results.

Loneliness and Mortality

Another noteworthy, albeit tentative, finding is that "those who would be alive 2 years after the initial interview reported less loneliness than those who would die in the next 2 years" (Jylhä, 2004, p. 161). This result complements those of other studies that showed that loneliness is associated with entering a nursing home (Russell et al., 1997). Moreover, loneliness has been linked to higher mortality (Russell & Cutrona, 1985; Russell et al., 1998; Olsen et al., 1991). If true, this undoubtedly has important policy implications. Yet additional questions need to be addressed. Does loneliness predict mortality above and beyond variables such as age, having network members, or having reasonable levels of social contact? If so, could it be that poor health contributes to loneliness, a position suggested by Creecy, Berg, and Wright (1985), rather than that loneliness leads to negative health outcomes? If loneliness does lead to mortality, are there limiting conditions for this effect? Via what mechanisms does it operate?

The answers to these questions may not be simple, but they would help target and implement better any policy or practical steps taken in this area. Some of the possibilities to avert loneliness that have already been suggested in the literature (see Russell et al., 1997) are

- increasing the quality of existing relationships
- involving lonely older adults in activities wherein they may develop the types of relationships that they desire with others
- increasing companionship relationships for individuals who receive instrumental support from children and other relatives

Is Loneliness Universal?

Is loneliness universal? Existential theorists such as Moustakas (1972) take loneliness as inherent to the human condition. So for them, the answer is yes, but this is a philosophical assumption rather than an empirically demonstrated conclusion.

To answer this question empirically, one needs a standard for deciding what constitutes universality. For example, the existentialists' view of universality implies that all humans experience loneliness. Another criterion might be that if the phenomenon can be found in all known cultures, then it is universal.

Loneliness appears to be present everywhere researchers look for it. For example, the researchers in this symposium have detected it in four different countries, including Canada; Stack (1998) found loneliness in all the samples of his 17-nation survey; and others have found it in virtually all parts of the world (e.g., Africa, the Middle East, Japan). It is not, however, seen in every

person in every culture. For instance, in the two studies of the stability of loneliness over time reported in this collection, 32 (Wenger & Burholt, 2004) to 51 per cent of the interviewees (Jylhä, 2004) said they were never lonely. One could argue that these individuals were in denial or that they must inevitably become lonely at some time in their lives - perhaps, when facing death. Nevertheless, these people stated that they had lived for long periods without experiencing loneliness. The strong social bonds reported by many of these individuals seem to support the idea that they really were not in denial.

In this collection, the study by van Tilburg, Havens, and de Jong Gierveld most directly addresses cross-national aspects of loneliness. It showed three noteworthy points. First, as the authors state, "to a certain extent the measurement of loneliness seems to be contextual and culturally bound ... [but] the differences in loneliness among older adults in the Netherlands, Tuscany, and Manitoba can be assessed with the instrument adopted" (2004, p. 179). Second, the prevalence of loneliness varied by country. Third, the strength of at least one predictor of loneliness, relational status, varied by country.

I feel loneliness occurs in all, or virtually all, cultures. Nonetheless, I suspect that loneliness is significantly influenced by cultural factors. From a discrepancy perspective, cultural factors that affect either desired or achieved levels of social contact or the model's mediating variables should affect loneliness. Thus, in individualistic cultures such as the United States, perhaps, the relational provisions of one's friendships play a key role in loneliness, whereas in collective cultures family relationships have a bigger role. Given the importance of attributions as a mediating factor in the discrepancy model, Anderson's (1999) finding that loneliness is higher in collective cultures where people accept greater responsibility for interpersonal failures is not surprising. Whatever one's theoretical perspective, it seems likely that cultural factors 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.

Summary and Conclusions

To sum up, I have argued that the research reported in the collection of articles presented here expands on several, but not all, classic loneliness topics and adds valuable new evidence on the stability of loneliness over long periods of time. Overall, I feel that the longitudinal studies of loneliness, with large, representative samples, have admirable strengths, although I hope more work will be done to develop instruments to discriminate between emotional and social loneliness. From a discrepancy perspective, I have discussed why social isolation and loneliness are not always synonymous. I have offered possible ways to reconcile the differences among data sets in terms of gender and age differences in loneliness. I am impressed with the tentative finding that loneliness predicts high levels of mortality and believe the mediating processes involved in this outcome should be further examined. I reflected on whether loneliness is universal, concluding that loneliness is found in virtually all societies but that there are important ways (e.g., in terms of prevalence; correlates; and perhaps, even, the meaning of the experience itself) that loneliness is culture-specific.

I approached the articles in this collection with enthusiasm; I leave with the feeling that my expectations were fulfilled. It is illuminating to read the various insights on the nature of social

isolation and loneliness that the contributors have provided in this symposium. Equally important, the authors' excellent longitudinal data sets will continue to serve in the future - as they have served in the past - as the foundation for numerous other publications.

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