Definitions of Social Isolation: A Pilot Study Using CLSA

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Defining social isolation
Defining social isolation

• No consistency in definitions
• No one cut-off to identify socially isolated individuals
• No “gold-standard” instrument
• Numerous terms used interchangeably and inconsistently
Describing our social world: loneliness and social isolation

**SOCIAL ISOLATION**

Concerns the *objective* situation of a person and refers to the absence of social relationships and contact (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006).

…”the continuum of objective social isolation puts social isolation at one extreme and social participation at the other.” p. 583

**LONELINESS**

An unpleasant *subjective* experience resulting from perceived mismatch between the (quantity or quality) of relationships we *want* compared to what we *have* (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; de Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006).
Social network structures

Lonely?
This means a person could have lots of relationships and be lonely.

This also means a person could have few relationships and NOT be lonely.
Social isolation and loneliness are health risks

- Decreased immune system
- Worse sleep quality
- Increased risk of heart disease and stroke
- Increased risk of dementia
- Increased risk of depression
- Poor quality of life
- Increased health care use
- Increased risk of mortality
- Etc.
Social isolation and loneliness are health risks

“The influence of social relationships on risk for mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality.”

(Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010)
Social isolation and loneliness are common

- About 20% of older adults are socially isolated
- 20-40% of older adults report moderate to severe loneliness; 7-9% report severe loneliness
- 20-30% of middle-aged adults (aged 45-64) report being lonely

- Findings differ depending on samples, age groups, and definitions
Factors related to social isolation and loneliness

- Social groups and demographic factors
- Life events and transitions
- Personality and psychological response
- Health-related factors
- Environmental factors

Social isolation or loneliness
At this point we know more about what puts people at risk of social isolation or loneliness than we know about what reduces social isolation or allows people to overcome loneliness.
The problem

• How do we **identify** socially isolated (or lonely) people, the “hidden citizens”?  
• How do we **target** interventions at people at risk of, or who are already experiencing, social isolation or loneliness?  
• What interventions work best for which groups of people?
Defining social isolation
Measurement of social isolation

1. Structural: The people in a person’s life
2. Functional: What the people in a person’s life do (social support)
3. Loneliness: How a person feels about people in their network
Measurement

Structural ↔ Functional

Subjective ↔ Objective

Valtorta et al., 2016. BMJ open access.
Measurement

Structural  ↔  Functional

Subjective  ↔  Objective

MOS social support survey

Valtorta et al., 2016. BMJ open access.
Social network structures

Elizabeth

John
Our pilot study

• CLSA Tracking Cohort
  – Ages 45-85
  – N=21,241 (8,782 aged 65-85)
Measures – Social network structure

Social network size. Number of: 1) biological children, adopted children, as well as stepchildren; 2) living siblings; 3) relatives; 4) close friends; and 5) neighbors.

Frequency of contact with network members. “More than 1 year ago” to “Within the last day or two”.

Social participation. Frequency of participation in eight activities in the past 12 months.
Measures – Social network function

Social support. 19-item Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) – Social Support Survey.

• Affectionate support (e.g., “someone who hugs you”);
• Emotional support (e.g., “someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk”);
• Positive social interaction (e.g., “some to get together with for relaxation”);
• Tangible support (e.g., “someone to help you if you were confined to bed”).
Some results

1. A comparison of the prevalence of social isolation using different definitions.
Comparing a few social isolation definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Living alone</th>
<th>No contact with social network members in last 6 months to a year</th>
<th>Very little contact with social network members in last 6 months to a year</th>
<th>Low contact with social network members in last 6 months to a year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 45-64</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 65+</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some results

2. An examination of the relationship between social network groups and social support.
   - Identify social network groups using cluster analysis
   - Compare social network groups on socio-demographic and health variables
   - Examine the association between network groups and types of social support

Harasemiw, Newall, Shooshtari, Mackenzie, & Menec. From social integration to social isolation: The relationship between social network types and social support in a national sample of older Canadians. Paper submitted for publication
Cluster analysis approach

• Identifies groups of individuals that are homogenous within themselves, but as heterogeneous as possible from other groups of individuals.

• Clustering variables:
  – Social network size
  – Frequency of contact
  – Social participation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>• large and diverse social network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse, low siblings</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>• similar to the diverse cluster, but with few siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family-friend focused</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>• lower frequency of seeing neighbors and participation in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few children</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>• few children, but a relatively high frequency of contact with neighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few friends</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>• few close friends and participated the least in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>• few neighbors, few close friends and low participation in social activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social integration

- **Diverse**
  - 25.4%
  - Large and diverse social network

- **Diverse, low siblings**
  - 23.6%
  - Similar to the diverse cluster, but with few siblings

- **Family-friend focused**
  - 15.5%
  - Lower frequency of seeing neighbors and participation in social activities

- **Few children**
  - 13.9%
  - Few children, but a relatively high frequency of contact with neighbors

- **Few friends**
  - 11.7%
  - Few close friends and participated the least in social activities

- **Restricted**
  - 10%
  - Few neighbors, few close friends and low participation in social activities

Social isolation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Network Cluster</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>• large and diverse social network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>young and healthy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse, low siblings</td>
<td>• similar to the diverse cluster, but with few siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>older</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family-friend focused</td>
<td>• lower frequency of seeing neighbors and participation in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “average”; no distinguishing socio-demographic or health characteristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few children</td>
<td>• few children, but a relatively high frequency of contact with neighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>the single group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few friends</td>
<td>• few close friends and participated the least in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>male, married group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>• few neighbors, few close friends and low participation in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>The female, single group</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Social network groups and social support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diverse</strong></td>
<td>25.4% • Comparison group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diverse, low siblings</strong></td>
<td>23.6% • No difference on any of the 4 social support scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family-friend focused</strong></td>
<td>15.5% • Less emotional support and positive social interaction, No difference for affectionate and tangible support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Few children</strong></td>
<td>13.9% • Less affectionate and tangible support, No difference for emotional support and positive social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Few friends</strong></td>
<td>11.7% • Less emotional support, positive social interaction, affectionate and tangible support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restricted</strong></td>
<td>10% • Less emotional support, positive social interaction, affectionate and tangible support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

• There is a continuum from social integration to social isolation.
  – The more socially isolated individuals (those with more restricted social networks) are at risk of not having any social support needs met (even in the presence of a spouse).
  – People with moderately restricted social networks may also not have specific social support needs met.
Conclusions

- Examining people’s network structures may help to identify social support gaps.
  - Targeted interventions are needed for people with different network structures.
Defining social isolation
Defining social isolation

• Separate social network structure from function (social support) in social isolation definitions

• We still need to identify cut-offs