

# Definitions of Social Isolation: A Pilot Study Using CLSA

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# Defining social isolation

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isolation

loneliness  
inclusion  
participation  
networks  
convoys  
social connectivity  
support  
subjective  
objective  
connectiveness

# Defining social isolation

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- 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

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## SOCIAL ISOLATION

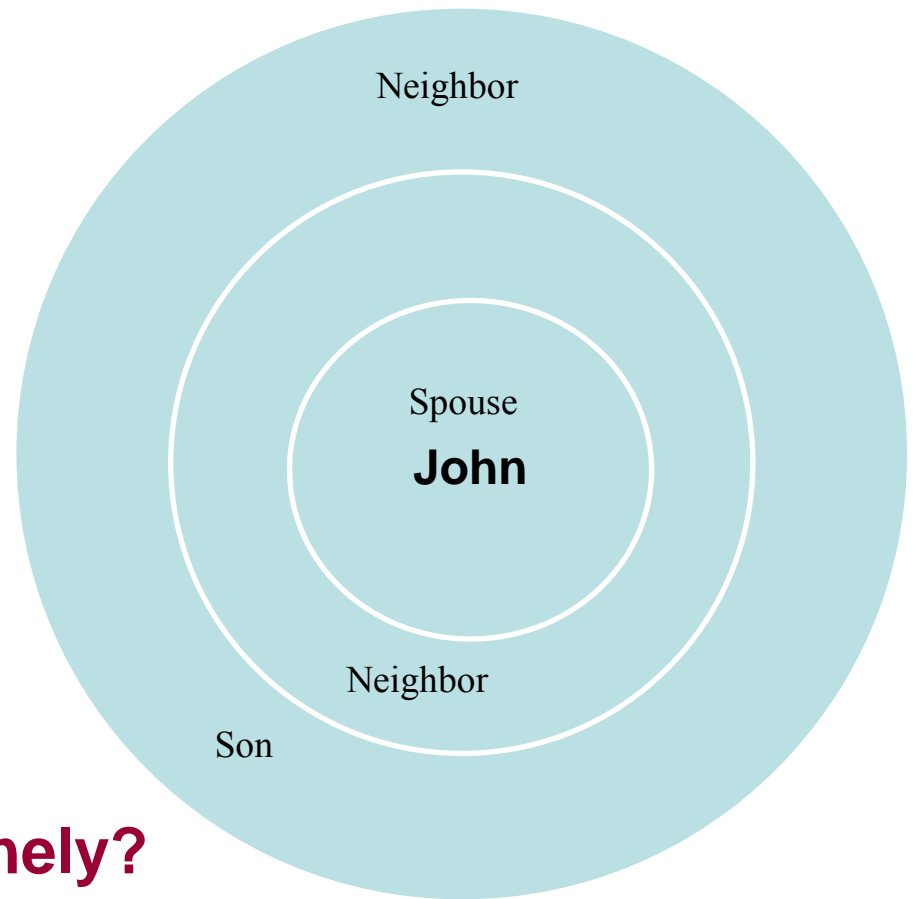
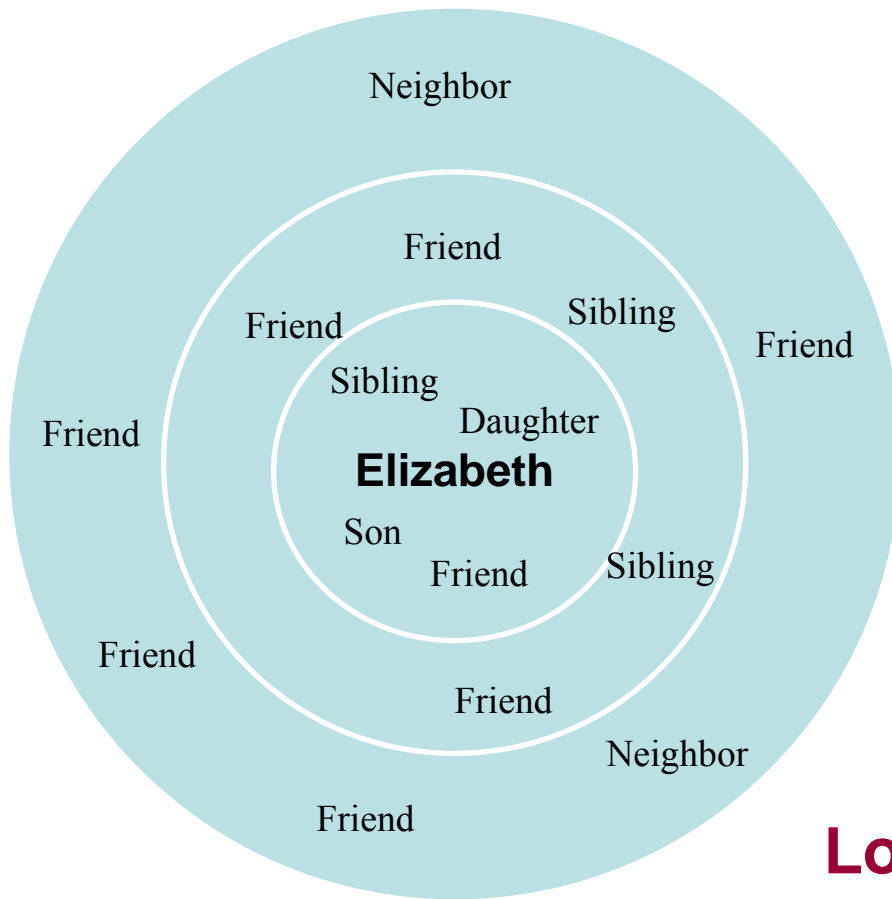
Concerns the **objective** situation of a person and refers to the absence of social relationships and contact (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006).

*...“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?

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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

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- 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

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

(Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010)





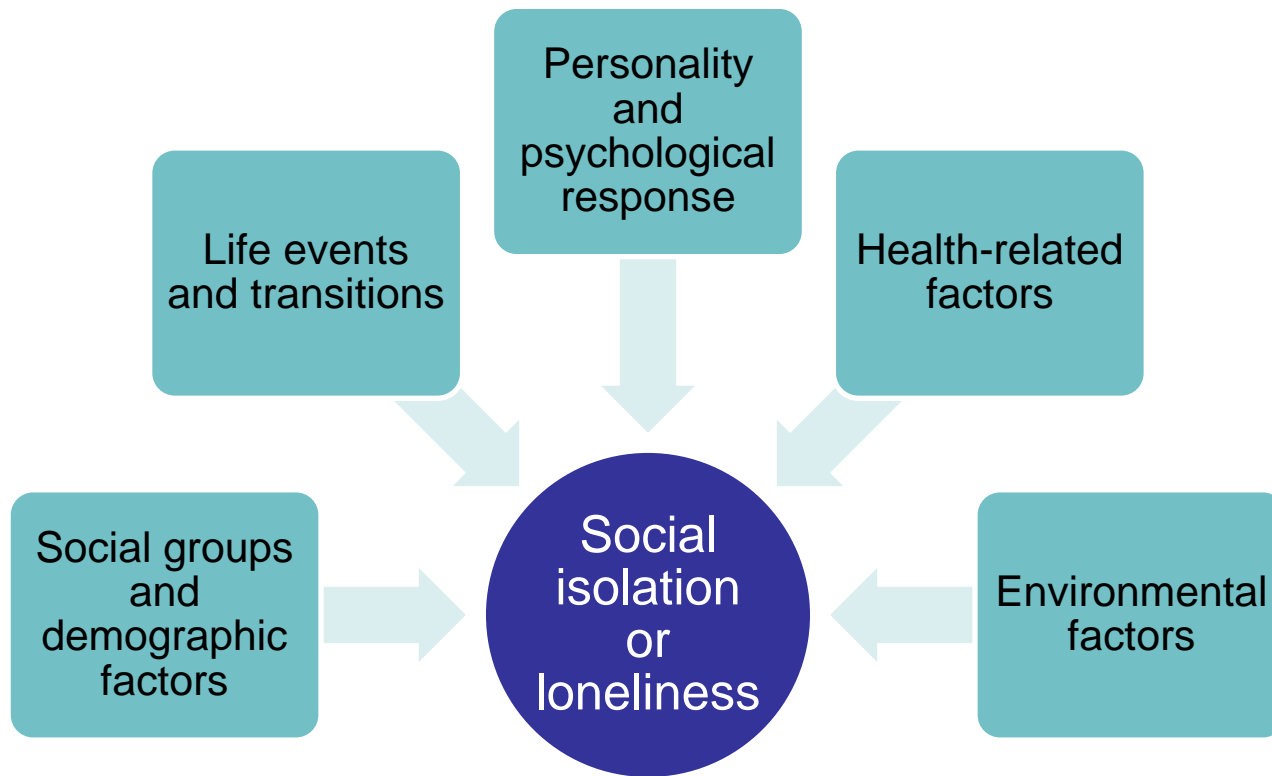
# Social isolation and loneliness are common

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- 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

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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

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- 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?

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# Measurement of social isolation

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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

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Structural  Functional

Subjective  Objective

Valtorta et al., 2016. BMJ open access.

# Measurement

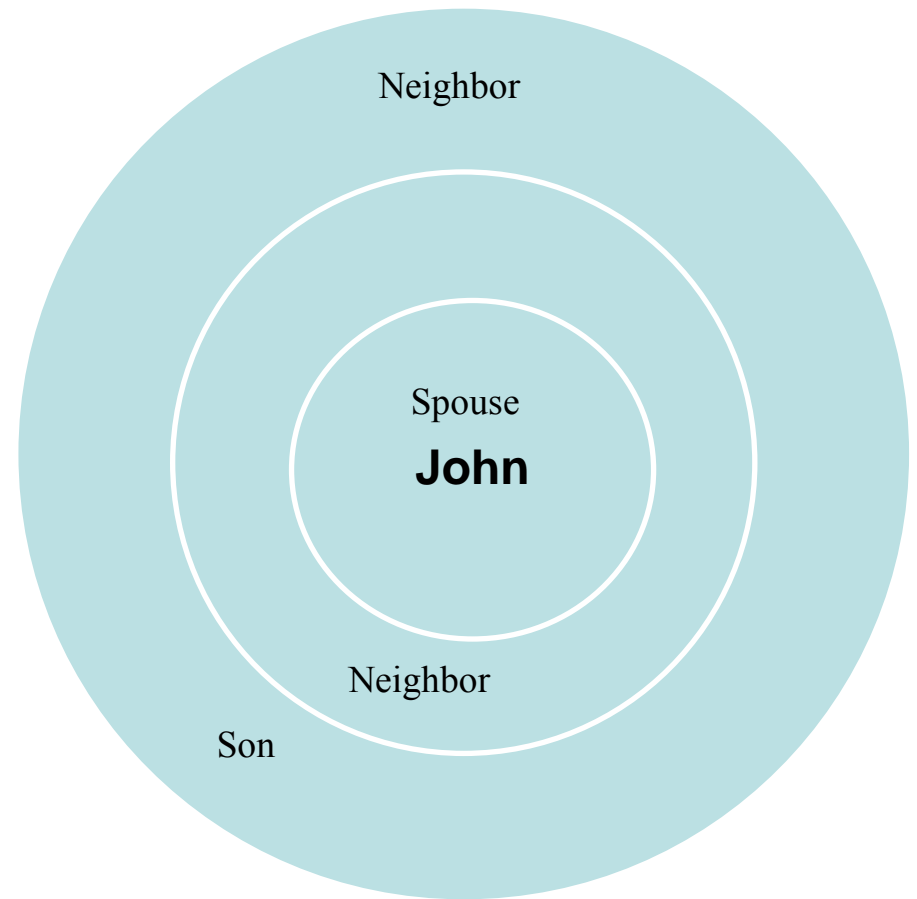
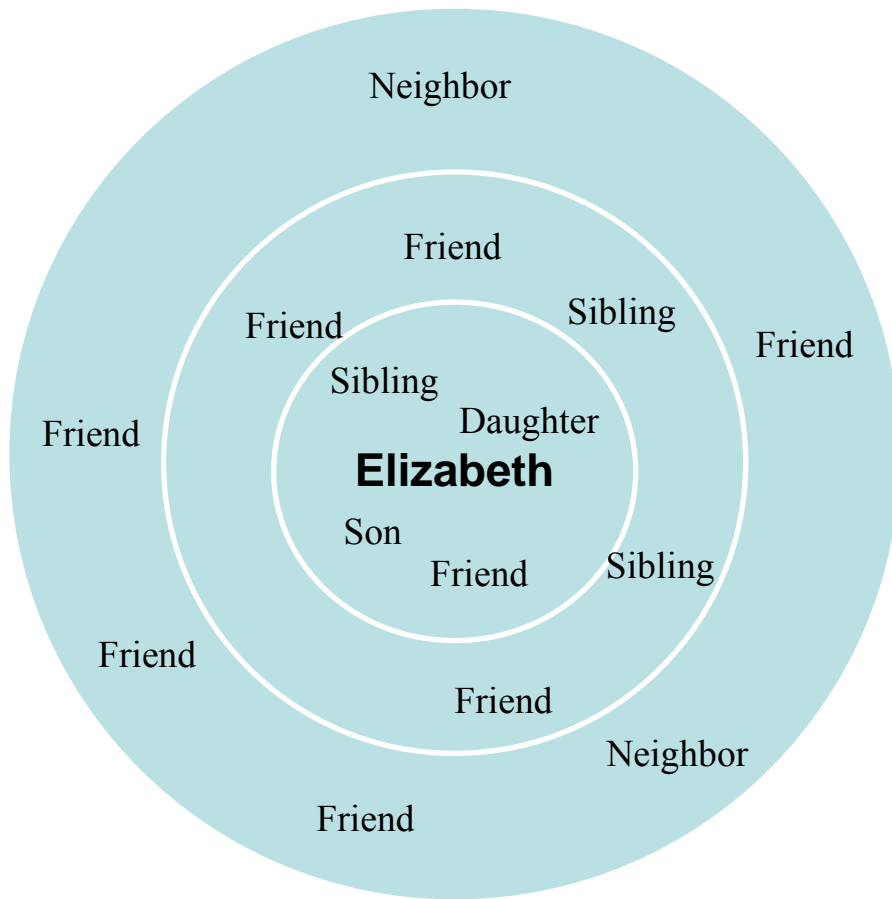
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Valtorta et al., 2016. BMJ open access.



# Social network structures



# Our pilot study

- CLSA Tracking Cohort
  - Ages 45-85
  - N=21,241 (8,782 aged 65-85)

# Measures – Social network structure

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**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

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## **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

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

# Comparing a few social isolation definitions

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

# Some results

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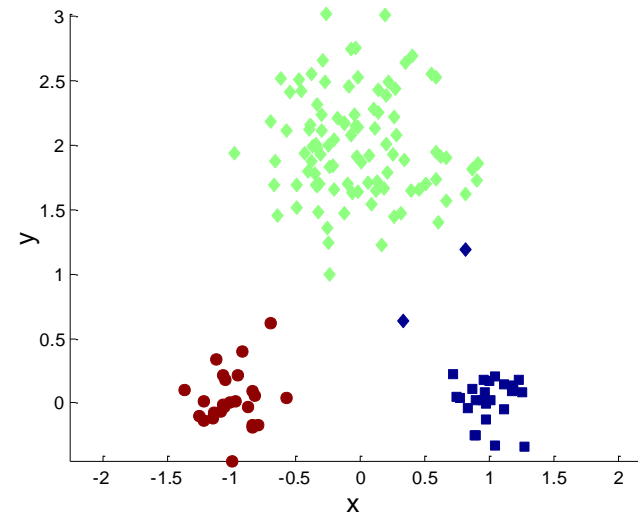
## 2. An examination of the relationship between social network groups and social support.

- 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





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 integration



Diverse  
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- large and diverse social network

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Restricted  
10%

- few neighbors, few close friends and low participation in social activities

Social isolation

Diverse  
25.4%

- large and diverse social network
- **young and healthy**

Diverse, low siblings  
23.6%

- similar to the diverse cluster, but with few siblings
- **older**

Family-friend focused  
15.5%

- lower frequency of seeing neighbors and participation in social activities
- **“average”; no distinguishing socio-demographic or health characteristic**

Few children  
13.9%

- few children, but a relatively high frequency of contact with neighbors
- **the single group**

Few friends  
11.7%

- few close friends and participated the least in social activities
- **male, married group**

Restricted  
10%

- few neighbors, few close friends and low participation in social activities
- **The female, single group**

# Social network groups and social support

Diverse  
25.4%

- Comparison group

Diverse, low siblings  
23.6%

- No difference on any of the 4 social support scales

Family-friend focused  
15.5%

- Less emotional support and positive social interaction
- No difference for affectionate and tangible support

Few children  
13.9%

- Less affectionate and tangible support
- No difference for emotional support and positive social interaction

Few friends  
11.7%

- Less emotional support, positive social interaction, affectionate and tangible support

Restricted  
10%

- Less emotional support, positive social interaction, affectionate and tangible support

# Conclusions

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- 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

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

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- Separate social network structure from function (social support) in social isolation definitions
- We still need to identify cut-offs







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