

Culture, social isolation and loneliness in later life

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Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the influence of culture on social isolation and loneliness. It draws together the evidence to theorise a pathway to loneliness that is influenced by culture. While there is a large body of evidence to demonstrate that individual characteristics or life events impact on customary levels of social interaction for older people, and loneliness, there is less evidence concerning the impact of macro-level cultural factors such as values, norms, and beliefs on these outcomes.

Social isolation is defined as a lack of or low levels of meaningful social contact through social relationships (Lubben et al., 2006). Loneliness is defined as a negative emotional experience that is the reaction to a mismatch between expectations concerning the quality and quantity of social relationships and those that are achieved (Fried et al., 2020 and Prohaska et al., 2020). A subjective negative evaluation of romantic relationships or relationships with a significant other can result in emotional loneliness. Deviation from an internalised “ideal” social network of family and friends can result in social loneliness. Thus, an older person may be isolated but not lonely, lonely but not isolated, both lonely and isolated, or neither. This chapter describes how culture influences achieved social relations, desired social relations, and loneliness.

Different academic disciplines and ideologies define culture differently. In this chapter, culture refers to a set of norms, beliefs, values, customs, and traditions that are shared by a nation, region, community, or group. Culture is “learned” through the social environment and is transmitted through language, rituals, religion, institutions, art, music, and literature. Culture is dynamic: it can be passed from one generation to another but is also subject to change over time (Winter and Burholt, 2018). Cultural heritage is forged within the culture of the family of origin or the place or places in which one lives or has lived, whereas cultural identity is expressed through self-categorisation into cultural group(s) (Burholt et al., 2016a). A culturally defined position in society can be ascribed by others according to age, gender or

gender identity, ethnicity, social class or economic position, sexuality or sexual identity, and disability or disease.

Cultural exclusion is defined as the extent to which people are able and willing to conform to prevailing cultural trends (Winter and Burholt, 2018). Cultural exclusion is the most under-explored domain of social exclusion (Lysgård, 2008).

Dominant Cultural Norms, Cultural Variation, and Social Isolation

In the social sciences, there is a long history of associating cultural variation with the demographic transition between traditional and modern societies (Triandis, 1993; Durkheim, [1893] 1997; Tönnies, 1957; and Weber, 1947). For example, cross-cultural differences may be examined by contrasting high-income countries and low- and middle-income countries or urban and rural societies.

In simplistic terms, traditional societies are often referred to as collectivist cultures: bound together by territorial tribalism, economic interdependence, and family solidarity. In a collectivist culture, the needs and goals of the kinship group, family, or community have greater value than the desires of an individual. Community cohesion is important and is maintained through social control: sanctions are applied to those who deviate from the culturally prescribed norms.

Modern, industrialised societies are often referred to as individualistic cultures. These are typically characterised by geographic separation, diffuse social ties, and independence of nuclear units across generations. In individualistic cultures, the needs of the individual have primacy, rather than the common good.

Considering cultural variation and social isolation in later life, collectivist and individualist cultures are each associated with more or less normative restrictions or freedoms around forming and maintaining social relationships (Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2013). From this perspective, conforming to restrictive norms in collectivist cultures decreases the likelihood of physical isolation for older people when compared to individualist cultures. For example, conforming to collectivist cultural norms comprising relational stability, intergenerational co-residence, or a high frequency of visits to older parents contributes to a lower likelihood of social isolation in later life. On the other hand, individualistic cultural norms for social relationship are less restrictive: relationship dissolution (divorce, separation), family dispersion, and infrequent parental visits are socially acceptable but increase the risk of social isolation for older people (Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2013).

Despite the persuasiveness of this argument, with the exception of Fokkema et al. (2012), few studies have used indicators of social isolation to explain cultural variation in the distal outcome of loneliness. The limited

number of studies drawing on culture to explain social isolation may be because the association between “collectivist culture–traditional society” and “individualist culture–modern society” is a gross over-simplification of cultural differentiation. Although family or social solidarity patterns are often described in terms of a gradient from individualistic tradition to collectivistic tradition, there are significant cultural variations in norms governing social relationships that are more nuanced than the collectivist–individualist gradient or dichotomy suggests. In this respect, the status that a cultural group holds or the perceived transgression of cultural norms by an individual or cultural group both have consequences for social relationships and social isolation (Figure 5.1).

Cultural Identities, Culturally Defined Social Position, and Social Isolation

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987) suggest that the degree of identification with a particular group in society is based on perceived shared characteristics or cultural attributes, including norms, values, beliefs, and/or behaviours. Groups may be based on a variety of factors such as nationality, political affiliation, religion, gender, geographical location, social status, and so on, or based on combinations of these categories. Sociocultural identities “both describe and prescribe one’s attributes as a member of that group [...] that is, what one should think and feel and how one should behave” (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995, p. 206).

Social identity theory also focuses on inter-group relationships and comparison. Comparisons with other cultural groups are influenced by subjective belief structures concerning the perceived legitimacy of the status of the group (Hogg et al., 1995) which is often contrasted to dominant cultural

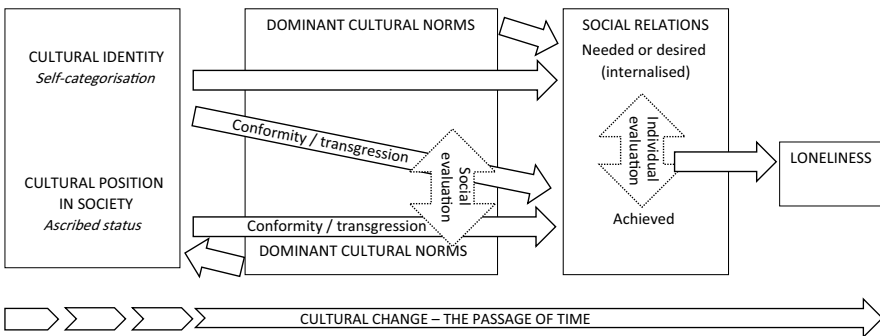


Figure 5.1 Hypothesised pathway to loneliness indicating the influences of cultural identity, cultural position in society, and dominant cultural norms

norms. For example, with regard to particular ethnic or migrant groups, outgroup social categorisation is usually associated with some identifiable cultural attributes such as skin colour, accented speech, and apparel. Prejudice and discrimination directed at members of the outgroup can lead to exclusion from opportunities for social interaction or participation and isolation.

Regardless of how someone self-identifies with a particular cultural group or groups, an older person's culturally defined position in society can be ascribed by others according to age, gender or gender identity, ethnicity, social class or economic position, sexuality or sexual identity, disability or disease (e.g. dementia) that confer a particular cultural stigma.

The perceived conformity to or transgression of dominant cultural norms by individuals who locate a particular culturally defined position in society can have the same outcome as self-identifying with a particular cultural group that is "othered": it can influence access to social relationships, social participation and can result in discrimination or exclusion from social relationships and social isolation (Burholt et al., 2020b).

Research in various cultures and contexts has demonstrated that the transgression of cultural norms by older people can result in social isolation. For example, in mainland China, the social connections of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) older adults are influenced by the intersection of LGBT stigma and cultural values (familial responsibility, filial piety – respect and obligations towards parents). Non-conformity or unfilial behaviour by older LGBT Chinese is visible to others because they are less likely to have a child to maintain the continuity of their heritage. Hua et al. (2019) argue that this results in the loss of moral standing, weakening of social ties, and social isolation: social sanctions comprise separation within (families) and loss of interpersonal social connections in the community.

Cultural non-conformity or transgression of norms for social relationships (i.e. when an older person's social or family network deviates from the social ideal) as demonstrated by LGBT older adults in China creates a vicious circle entailing further social ostracisation. For example, Burholt et al. (2020a) describe the situation of a childless unmarried older woman in India. As an unmarried woman, she was reliant on social relationships with her younger brother who was the closest male family member. She was not permitted to visit other people because it was socially undesirable, and non-conformity would result in disgrace for her brother's family. Eventually, her poor health and incontinence conferred a particular cultural stigma on the household and her brother moved her to a care home. She was labelled a socially undesirable relative and perceived as "trouble" to his family. For this older woman, non-conformity to Indian cultural norms (i.e. unmarried, without children to provide support, and incontinent) resulted in social isolation.

Older people may be "othered" because they are perceived to transgress dominant cultural norms of independence and/or youth. A medical or

“deficit” model of ageing often portrays older people using negative stereotypes, for example, as living with disabilities and in poor health. This contributes to the dominant discourse and cultural norms that spawn ageism (i.e. older people as a socially undesirable “outgroup”). Similarly, identification or labelling with a particular disease such as dementia influences the way in which older people are treated: public attitudes, stigma, and discrimination create barriers that influence access to social resources, impacting on social isolation (Burholt et al., 2016b). The degree to which the medical model of ageing dominates a culture’s discourse contributes to the belief or value system that, in turn, influences the extent to which an older person is provided with the opportunities to engage in fulfilling social activities.

Overall, social mores – social norms that are widely observed within a particular society or culture – can have the effect of either increasing or decreasing social isolation of older people. The effect is dependent on the prevailing dominant cultural norms that intersect with the cultural identity or sociocultural position of the older person.

Migration, Cultural Change, and Social Isolation

Cultures differ between geographic locations and under different economic and political contexts over time. Older people may experience cultural change because they have moved between places with different dominant cultures. Inglehart and Baker (2000) suggest that basic “values” are fixed by adulthood. In this respect, older people’s cultural norms may endure from an earlier period or a different place; they may feel excluded from practicing older traditions or values that are important to them but that form part of their cultural identity.

Cross-cultural studies exploring cultural exclusion and social isolation often focus on comparisons, for example, between indigenous populations and transnational migrants or ethnic minority groups (Torres, 2012 and Burholt et al., 2016a). Migrants have often left behind a cultural context which gave meaning to their lives, and Torres (2012) argues that in a new home country, migrants live “in between” cultures. In this respect, cultural exclusion or inclusion is often assumed to be associated with acculturative demands (Berry, 2006).

Acculturation was defined by Redfield et al. (1936: 149) as, “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural pattern of either or both groups”. Thus, “successful acculturation” of older migrants was assumed to result in the adoption of some cultural conventions in the new home country and social integration. Acculturation has generally been rejected because of the failure to address plurality of cultural identities, complexity, and context, especially when examining human development and the ageing process.

There is a paucity of research on the cultural exclusion of older migrants. The evidence that exists is implicit rather than explicit. For example, migrant settlement and relocation patterns often result in areas with a single predominant ethnic group (sometimes referred to as an “ethnic enclave”). While cultural or ethnic clustering results in a strong connected social network, that may be advantageous, for example, in seeking work, we do not know the extent to which settlement patterns of older adults are due to the desire for cultural inclusion: living in close proximity to others with similar norms, values, and beliefs and where the trappings associated with one’s culture (e.g. food, clothing, places of worship) are easily accessible.

Despite the potential positive impacts on cultural inclusion and social connectivity, ethnic clustering may have the effect of decreasing older people’s inclusion and interaction with other cultural groups in society (Burholt, 2004). Cultural clustering versus dispersed settlement patterns of cultural groups is likely to influence the ways in which social relationships are organised and thus have an indirect effect on loneliness (Rokach et al., 2001).

Ageing in Place, Cultural Change, and Social Isolation

There is very little research that considers how cultural change impacts the cultural exclusion of older people. As noted earlier in this chapter, cultures are not static, they follow different trajectories over time. Adoption of a particular culture (e.g. local, regional, or national) varies between individuals and may be related to personal factors such as age or generation (Higgs and Gilleard, 2010 and Keating et al., 2015). As noted in the previous section of this chapter, cultural change and its impact on social isolation may be especially pertinent to older migrants who have relocated to places with different dominant cultures but is also relevant to older people ageing in place who have experienced cultural change related to a specific period or place. These cultural changes may also contribute to social isolation and loneliness (DiMaggio, 1994 and Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

Historically, many indigenous populations have been subjected to colonisation and oppression which has contributed to cultural change and cultural exclusion. For example, *kaumātua* (older Māori) in New Zealand (Hokowhitu et al., 2020), Aboriginal people in Australia (Sivertsen et al., 2019), Canada (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018), and the USA (Spring, 2016) were historically compelled to dissociate with their cultures. These period effects (historical events that affect an entire population at a specific time) have an enduring effect on the cultural exclusion and social isolation of older people. For example, the lack of integration of indigenous (and other) cultures into care services (e.g. aged residential care) means that older indigenous peoples may not be provided with culturally safe environments that allow social connections to flourish in later life.

Aside from the rapid effects of colonisation, the pace of cultural change may be influenced by structural changes such as improved communication networks, immigration policies, or policy initiatives that select certain areas for investment in business, education, or leisure and that lead to population mobility. Winter and Burholt (2018) have argued that “cultural values often leave their imprint on subsequent generations, long after the material conditions responsible for those values have altered” (p.7).

In rural Wales (UK), Winter and Burholt (2018) found that period effects influenced culture. The demise of local industries (e.g. coal mining), language and educational policy developments, and population change were underpinned by a trajectory from collectivist to individualistic cultural values. Place effects varied between rural areas, but on the whole, population stability, local services, and employment opportunities transitioned to population churn, remote services, and few employment opportunities. Consequently, the cultural identity of local older Welsh people shifted from being in harmony with collectivist cultural norms to in conflict with individualistic cultural norms of in-migrants and younger cohorts. There were fewer opportunities to socialise with people with common cultural values and who spoke Welsh. However, older people were not necessarily passive, and to offset or prevent cultural exclusion, some set up heritage groups to encourage an appreciation of the areas of cultural history and to initiate new social connections.

In summary, in our model of the pathway to loneliness, cultural change (period effects and place effects) can lead to the cultural exclusion of older people. Cultural exclusion influences the opportunities for social connections and relationships, contributing to social isolation.

Cultural Ideals, Relationship Evaluation, and Loneliness

Differences in average levels of loneliness for older people between cultures would be expected as expectations concerning ideal relationships are shaped by cultural norms (van Staden and Coetzee, 2010). Earlier in this chapter, I described how cultures with more restrictive norms concerning social relationships could lead to lower levels of social isolation for older people. However, in these cultures, there is also a greater likelihood that social relationships deviate from the contemporary or historical normative ideal internalised by older people. In turn, a negative evaluation of social relationships that fail to meet these high expectations contributes to loneliness. This notion is supported by a body of evidence that demonstrates greater average levels of loneliness for older people in collectivist cultures compared to individualistic cultures (Lykes and Kimmelmeier, 2013 and Dykstra, 2009), although there is some evidence to the contrary (Barreto et al., 2021).

Table 5.1 Summary of positive and negative effects from loneliness regressed on personal characteristics (omitted) and network type (Burholt et al., 2017)

<i>Network type</i>	<i>Loneliness</i>
Multigenerational household: older integrated	+
Middle-aged friends	+
Restricted non-kin	+
Multigenerational household: younger family	-

Drawing on the individualism–collectivism gradient, but reflecting a more nuanced difference between cultures, some studies have demonstrated how cultural dissonance contributes to loneliness. Burholt et al. (2017) established the “ideal” social network for six collectivist ethnic groups in the UK. They demonstrated that “Multigenerational: Younger Family Networks” were the most common network type and typically comprised three or more generations living in the same house. Deviation from this network configuration resulted in greater levels of loneliness for older people, even for those with other types of multigenerational households who were not socially isolated (Table 5.1). Similarly, Hansen and Slagsvold (2016) demonstrated that the association between living alone and loneliness varied according to cultural expectations, with less loneliness identified in European countries moving from North to South. In Northern European countries, living alone is concordant with expectations, whereas in Southern European countries, intergenerational co-residence is the norm and living alone contributes to the experience of loneliness.

The subjective evaluation of whether one’s achieved relationships match the internalised desire, expectation, or ideal concerning the quality and quantity of relationships is the final process in the hypothesised cultural pathway to loneliness (Figure 5.1).

Conclusions

There is little theorising underpinning the small body of research evidence on the influence of culture on isolation and loneliness in later life. Many of the potential relationships between elements of the hypothesised model require further investigation. Despite the limitations, the hypothesised pathway provides a good starting point for further investigation. In this model, dominant cultural norms define the ideal range of relationships that are acceptable for an older person. Dominant norms are subject to change over time and vary between places. An older person’s cultural identity or cultural position in society determines the extent to which they are perceived to conform or transgress the norms concerning social relationships. The “reaction” of the dominant culture to the cultural group/cultural position can result in cultural

exclusion or inclusion and in turn impact achieved social relationships. The subjective evaluation of achieved social relations is influenced by cultural values concerning the normative expectations for the “ideal” levels and types of relationships. A mismatch between the internalised ideal and achieved relationships leads to loneliness.

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