



## Research Bulletin - 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, May 2013

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The Campaign to End Loneliness Research Hub supports the work of the Campaign by gathering, communicating and contributing to the evidence base around loneliness and isolation. Members of the Hub include leading academics in the field along with public and voluntary sector representatives.

The Research Hub, and this quarterly bulletin, aims to instigate debate and action to fill the research gaps and produce a better understanding of how to approach the controversies in research into loneliness.

This edition of the Research Bulletin contains the first in a series of short essays on the theme controversies and gaps in loneliness research. Each article in this series will address current areas of debate and identify gaps in the research into loneliness and isolation from the angle of the author's particular research interest. Designed to establish an argument, we welcome your comments and responses.

The Research Bulletin is only sent to supporters of the Campaign to End Loneliness. To find out more about joining the campaign, visit [our website](#).

### **New feature: Controversies and gaps in loneliness research**

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#### **Loneliness and isolation in LGBT elders**

*Jill Wilkens, Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, London South Bank University*

While 'elders' are often regarded as a single entity for research and advocacy purposes, within this category are distinct populations each with its own specific needs. The experiences of older individuals are not identical and are shaped by many factors including ethnicity, socio-economic status, location, and sexual identity. Several studies suggest that lesbians and gay men suffer disproportionately from loneliness and isolation as they age (Musingarimi, 2008; Kuyper and Fokkema, 2010). There is also evidence that group or network membership has positive benefits and may serve to reduce isolation and depression (Dietz and Dettlaff, 1997; Jacobs, Rasmussen and Hohman, 1999 and Grossman, 2006).

This article discusses the issue of loneliness and isolation in older lesbians and the significance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) specific services and groups. It is located within a political and economic backdrop of controversial funding cuts and reduced resources, which are presenting LGBT communities with an increasingly uncertain future. I suggest that the impact of these 'austerity measures' is potentially devastating to an already vulnerable population and requires urgent attention.

This article is based on a small-scale piece of research into whether a same-sex, same-sexuality, same-generation social group impacted on loneliness and isolation in lesbians aged 55 and over. 10 interviews were conducted with participants of 'Older & Wilder', a group meeting in Bradford, West Yorkshire. It was evident that many of the women in this small study were lonely or feared loneliness and often found that 'mainstream' groups exacerbated these feelings.

Although published research raises awareness of the loneliness and isolation faced by some lesbian elders, it also identifies that there are many gaps and limitations in the extant literature requiring further research and debate, including:

- How the experience of loneliness, and need for belongingness, are experienced by LBT women who have lived more openly compared with older adults who have had to conceal their sexual identity and relationships to some degree. (Similarly an investigation into loneliness in younger age groups would be beneficial)
- Whilst it is clear that many LGBT adults prefer same-sex/sexuality/generation groups, it is possible that different models and types of group offer different kinds of protection against both emotion and social loneliness
- There is a belief that, in the 'age of austerity', groups and organisations for sexual minority communities such as lesbian elders are an unaffordable and unnecessary luxury. This is a false economy; the effects of these and similar policy decisions will be far-reaching and injurious in terms of increasing loneliness and social isolation and the subsequent adverse impact on the health and well-being of all LGBT people, including elders

A full version of this article can be downloaded from the author's Academic.edu page: <http://lsbu.academia.edu/JillWilkins>

**Jill Wilkens is a PhD student at the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research at the London South Bank University.** Her postgraduate research focuses on loneliness and isolation, and the role of social support groups and networks in the lives of older lesbians, bisexuals and trans women. Jill recently completed an MA at the University of York.

If you would like to write about a controversy or a gap in loneliness research for this series, contact Anna Goodman ([anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](mailto:anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk)) with a brief outline your suggestion.

## News from the Research Hub

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### ■ British Society of Gerontology Roundtable

The Campaign to End Loneliness will be holding a roundtable at the 2013 British Society of Gerontology conference in Oxford. Titled *Loneliness: Controversies in Research*, the roundtable will facilitate attendees to debate the gaps and controversies that need more attention in loneliness research, practice and policy, including:

- Developing sustainable and long-term action to reduce loneliness: are we barking up the wrong tree?
- Can addressing loneliness reduce health and social care use?

- What are the factors that prevent the majority of people from experiencing loneliness?

This roundtable will build on last July's international research conference 'What do we know about loneliness?' and the recently published report *Loneliness: The State We're In*.

Research Hub members Professors Mima Cattan and Christina Victor, and Dr Barbara Hanratty, will all present on controversies from their recent research. If you are interested learning more about this roundtable, please contact Anna Goodman ([anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](mailto:anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk))

### ■ **New ELSA life-course loneliness study**

Christina Victor, Professor of Public Health at Brunel University and Co-Chair of the Campaign to End Loneliness Research Hub, has secured funding to explore changes in loneliness over time for people aged 50 and over using a large existing data set (the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing).

For 6,600 people, the project will describe how loneliness has changed over the 8 years they have been in the study and identify the factors that are linked with both the onset or worsening of loneliness and those linked with improvements in loneliness.

More information about this forthcoming research can be found in the 'Future research' section below.

## **New research into loneliness and social isolation**

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- **Step toe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P. and Wardle, J. (2013) 'Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110 (15) pp. 5797 - 5801**

This study from the University College London followed 6,500 men and women aged over 52 who took part in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) in 2004-5. Social isolation was assessed by contact with family and friends, and participation in civic organisations. Loneliness was assessed using the UCLA scale. All-cause mortality was also monitored.

It was found that mortality was higher among more socially isolated and lonely participants. However, after adjusting for demographic factors and baseline health, social isolation was more significantly associated with mortality than loneliness. The authors conclude the effect of loneliness was not independent of demographic characteristics or health problems, and did not contribute to the risk associated with social isolation.

In email conversation with the Campaign to End Loneliness, Professor Steptoe said that although this particular study did not show that loneliness was an independent risk factor for mortality, the UCL research group continues to be very interested in loneliness, particularly in relation to health and cognitive functioning and regard it as a major problem for older people today. We are pleased to welcome two members of Professor Steptoe's team – Dr Snorri Rafnsson and Dr Aparna Shankar – as new members of the Research Hub.

<http://www.pnas.org/content/110/15/5797>

- **Shankar, A., Hamer, M., McMunn, A., and Steptoe, A. (2013) 'Social Isolation and Loneliness: Relationships with Cognitive Function During 4 Years of Follow-up in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing' *Psychosomatic Medicine* 75 pp.161-170**

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of social isolation and loneliness on cognitive function in older adults over a four-year period. Data from social isolation, loneliness and verbal fluency, immediate recall and delayed recall were obtained at baseline from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). Follow-up measures on cognitive function were obtained four years later for over 6,000 participants.

Regression analyses were used to evaluate the association between the baseline and follow-up. Social isolation was found to be significantly associated with decreases in all cognitive function measures. Loneliness was associated with poorer immediate recall and delayed recall. The analysis also identified a significant interaction between educational level, isolation and loneliness for delayed recall. The authors conclude interventions to build social connections may be particularly beneficial for individuals with low levels of education.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23362501>

- **Skingley, A. (2013) 'Older people, isolation and loneliness: implications for community nursing' *British Journal of Community Nursing* 18 (2)**

This article summarises research on the prevalence, impact, identification and prevention of loneliness in older age. It recommends community nurses are in a position to effect change and utilise interventions that can improve the lives of older people they are contact with, including one-to-one interventions, group activities and community engagement approaches.

The author concludes a mixed-methods approach is needed in future loneliness research, as qualitative and quantitative studies alone can have limitations. The article also calls for the development of robust, validated measures of loneliness and isolation.

[http://www.internurse.com/cgi-bin/go.pl/library/contents.html?uid=4722;journal\\_uid=10](http://www.internurse.com/cgi-bin/go.pl/library/contents.html?uid=4722;journal_uid=10)

- **Verma, I. (2013) 'The Dreams and Needs of Housing for the Elderly – Findings from a user study on two sheltered housing schemes in Finland' *Sotera Institute, Department of Architecture, Aalto University*. [Edited and reproduced by Jeremy Porteus, Housing Learning and Improvement Network]**

This report from the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (Housing LIN) reproduces a multidisciplinary study from the Sotera Institute in the Department of Architecture at Aalto University, Finland. The study used different user-orientated research methods to collect information on the "hopes and dreams" of older residents in two different sheltered housing schemes.

The report explores the importance of outdoor space and stimulating communal areas in supporting social connectivity of older residents. It suggests that although the decline of functional abilities can

limit resident's use of living areas and ability to develop social relations, sheltered housing could play an important role in maintaining functioning capabilities and therefore social networks.

[http://www.housinglin.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Practice\\_examples/Housing\\_LIN\\_case\\_studies/HLIN\\_CaseStudy64\\_Finland.pdf](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Practice_examples/Housing_LIN_case_studies/HLIN_CaseStudy64_Finland.pdf)

### ■ **International Neuropsychological Society presentation: 'Senior Citizens who use Facebook have improve cognition'**

Online news and science website redOrbit has published a summary of Janelle Wohltmann's presentation to the International Neuropsychological Society (INS) Annual Meeting in February. Wohltmann, who graduated from the University of Arizona, studied whether use of the social network Facebook could help improve cognitive performance and feelings of social connectedness in a group of 14 older adults. A second group of 14 were taught how to use a different online diary platform and a third group of 14 were used as a control group.

Wohltmann showed the over-65 group using Facebook performed better on tasks designed to measure ability to "continuously monitor and quickly add or delete the contents of their working memory" after they learned to use Facebook.

However, the research found further investigation was needed to determine whether social networks made the older adults feel less lonely, and whether the social dimension to Facebook contributed to improvements in cognitive performance.

<http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/1112786403/cognition-improved-senior-facebook-users-021913/>

## **Future research**

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### ■ **New ELSA life-course loneliness study – Professor Christina Victor, Brunel University**

Research has consistently demonstrated that social relationships are key to a good quality of life in old age (Bowling 2005). Loneliness is one measure of compromised social relationships and is a significant problem for older people with approximately 42% of those aged 65+ in England reporting loneliness (10% reporting severe loneliness and 32% reporting moderate loneliness).

Our understanding of loneliness is based upon studies which measure loneliness at a single point in time. We do not have good evidence examining how loneliness may change as people grow older and we do not understand the pathways into and out of loneliness in later life, nor the factors which might help people recover from loneliness (or contribute to the onset of loneliness).

Because of the importance of loneliness as a problem for older people a range of services to combat loneliness have been developed, but few have shown that they actually achieve this aim. We suggest that part of the failure of current services is because we do not understand the pathways into and out of loneliness; the characteristics of those groups who move/into and out of loneliness; the factors that are linked with changes in loneliness and how social and health factors are linked to

loneliness pathways. The availability of this information may help us to design services that are more timely and tailored to the needs of individual older people and so help to promote quality of life in old age.

In our project we will explore changes in loneliness over time for people aged 50 and over using a large existing data set (the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing) which has followed people up from 2002 to 2010 longitudinally. For 6,600 people we will describe how loneliness has changed over the 8 years they have been in the study and identify the factors that are linked with both the onset or worsening of loneliness and those linked with improvements in loneliness.

We will also examine the link between loneliness at the start of the study and health status 8 years later. In particular we will be able to examine the link between loneliness and health status. Research in America has reported a link between loneliness and dementia but this has not been studied in Britain.

Our project aims to contribute to this important academic, policy and practice agenda by developing our understanding of the pathways into and out of loneliness in later life and establishing the health status and service use consequences of loneliness in later life.

## Campaign-related articles and research work

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### ■ Ferguson, L. (2013) 'Preventing and alleviating loneliness for older women' *Ageing and Women: Has the sisterhood forgotten older women?* International Longevity Centre (ILC-UK)

To mark International Women's Day 2013, the Campaign to End Loneliness offered an essay 'Preventing and alleviating loneliness for older women' to an International Longevity Centre (ILC-UK) compendium of essays on ageing and women.

This essay explains why addressing loneliness for women needs to be approached from two angles: targeting the individual woman and by better understanding the whole population of women as a whole.

<http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/blog/loneliness-older-women/>

### ■ Measuring loneliness and impact of interventions

The Campaign to End Loneliness has started a piece of scoping work on measurement of loneliness. It will examine existing measurement systems used by charities, commissioners and the research community, and identify the extent to which these are used and whether they are useful to funders and commissioners. Initial findings will be presented and discussed at the Connect + Act conference in June, and attendees given the chance to contribute to the research. A final report will be published in September 2013.

For more information or to suggest contributions for this project, please contact Anna Goodman ([anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](mailto:anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk))

## ■ What are the costs of loneliness?

The Campaign to End Loneliness is also undertaking research examining the costs of loneliness and isolation amongst older people to health and social care and to the broader array of public services. This is an initial piece of scoping work that will propose methodologies for calculating these costs which could be used by commissioners as they plan and develop public services. A session will take place at the Connect + Act conference, which will give attendees the opportunity to discuss these issues and contribute to the research. A final report will be published in September 2013.

For more information or to suggest contributions for this project, please contact Marianne Symons ([marianne@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](mailto:marianne@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk))

## Contribute to the Research Hub

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If you would like to contribute to the next Research Bulletin please contact Anna Goodman ([anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](mailto:anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk)). We welcome any contributions on published or unpublished research on the topic of loneliness in older age, including academic journals, new reports, non-academic articles, local evaluations and case studies.

## About the Campaign to End Loneliness

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The Campaign to End Loneliness is a coalition of organisations and individuals working together through research, policy, campaigning and innovation to combat loneliness and inspire individuals to keep connected in older age in the UK. The Campaign is led by 5 partners: Age UK Oxfordshire, Independent Age, Manchester City Council, Sense and WRVS. It is funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

The Campaign to End Loneliness has over 900 organisation and individuals supporters across the United Kingdom. To find out more about becoming a supporter and the work of the Campaign, visit: [www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk](http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk)