

Loneliness across the lifecourse

Prof. Christina Victor

Brunel University London

Overview of presentation

- Context for the study of loneliness
- The importance of stereotypes
- What do risk groups tell us?
- Reframing the study of loneliness: are we asking the right questions or developing the correct interventions?



Stereotypes of loneliness in later life

October 18th 2013 the Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt stated *"it is a source of "national shame" that as many as 800,000 people in England are "chronically lonely", ; "Some five million people say television is their main form of company,"* and concluding that *"A forgotten million who live amongst us - ignored to our national shame."* His proposed solution for the problem of loneliness in later life was to emulate the 'respect' and explicit inter-generational solidarity he states is articulated within Asian countries and *"that every lonely person has someone who could visit them and offer companionship"*.

Campaign to
EndLoneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE

Failure to visit parents now a 'crime' in China

BEIJING: A Chinese law requiring family members to visit their elderly relatives went into effect to howls of online ridicule, as the country's huge population ages rapidly.

The regulation "forces" children to visit their parents, the state-run *Global Times* newspaper said, with concerns growing over increasing numbers of "empty nest" homes.

China's rapid development has challenged its traditional extended family unit, and reports of elderly people being neglected or mistreated by their children have shocked the country.

Last year a farmer in the eastern

A country actually legislates respecting its parents? This is simply an insult to the nation

— SINA WEIBO COMMENTER

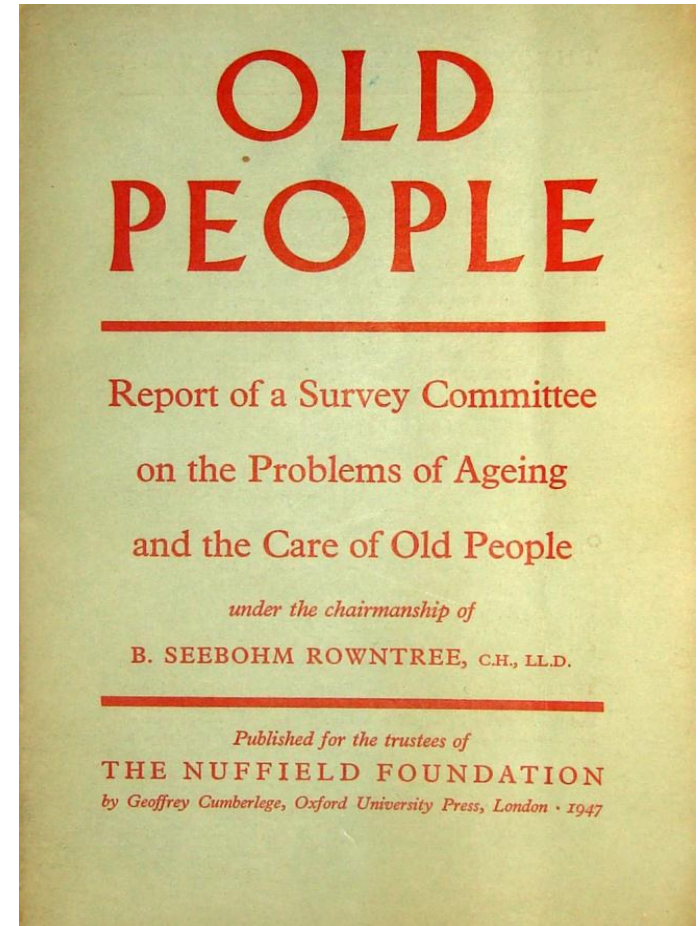
"A country actually legislates respecting its parents?" said one of the eight million people to comment

This is not new....

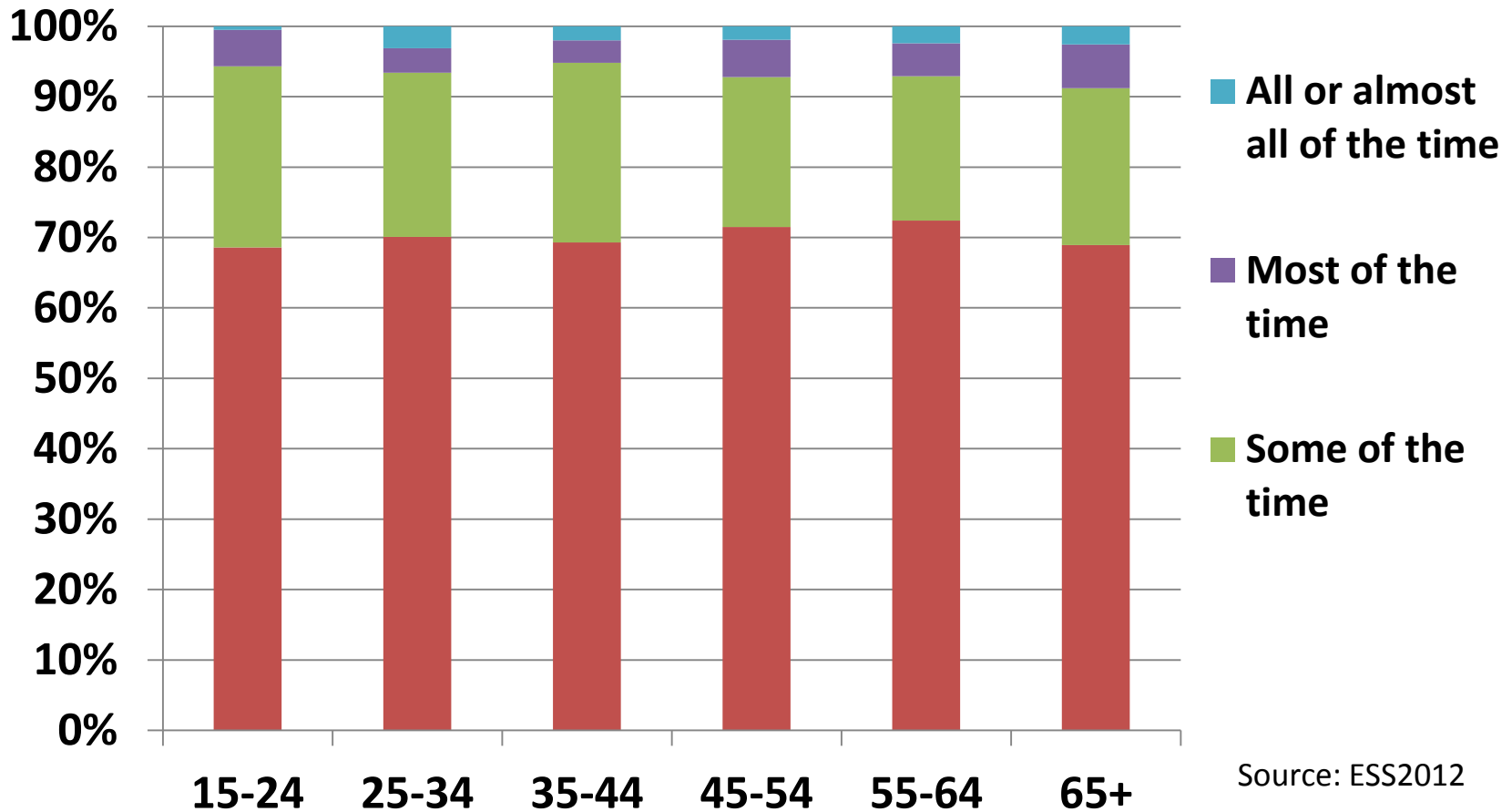
“A distressing feature of old age is loneliness. All who have done welfare work among the old have found it the most common, if at the same time the most imponderable, of the ills from which the aged suffer, and its frequency was amply confirmed by our study”

(Rowntree, 1947,52)

Campaign to
End Loneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE



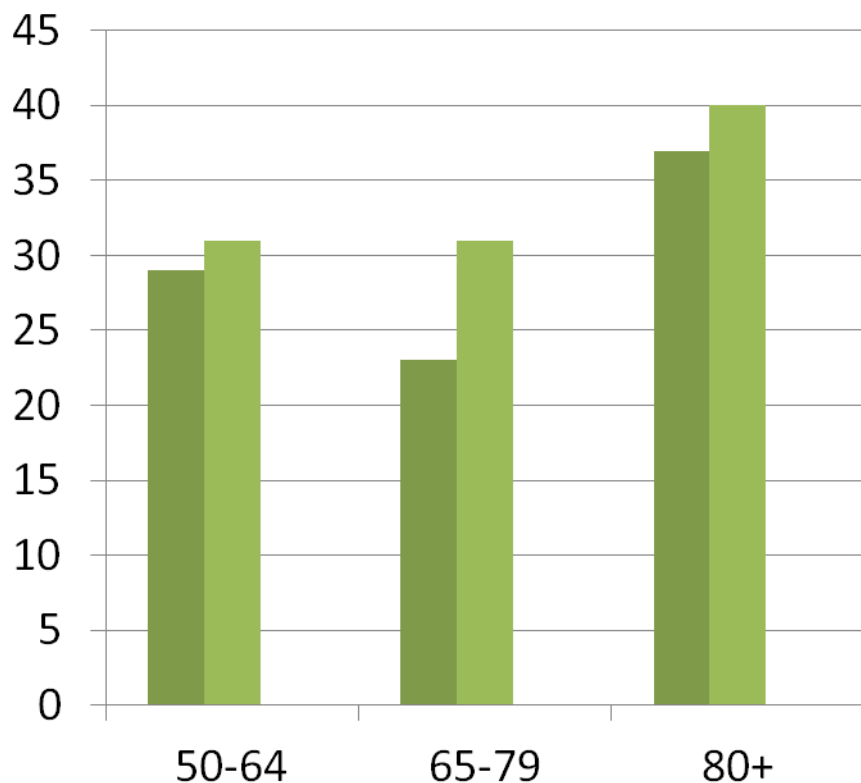
Loneliness: A problem of old age?



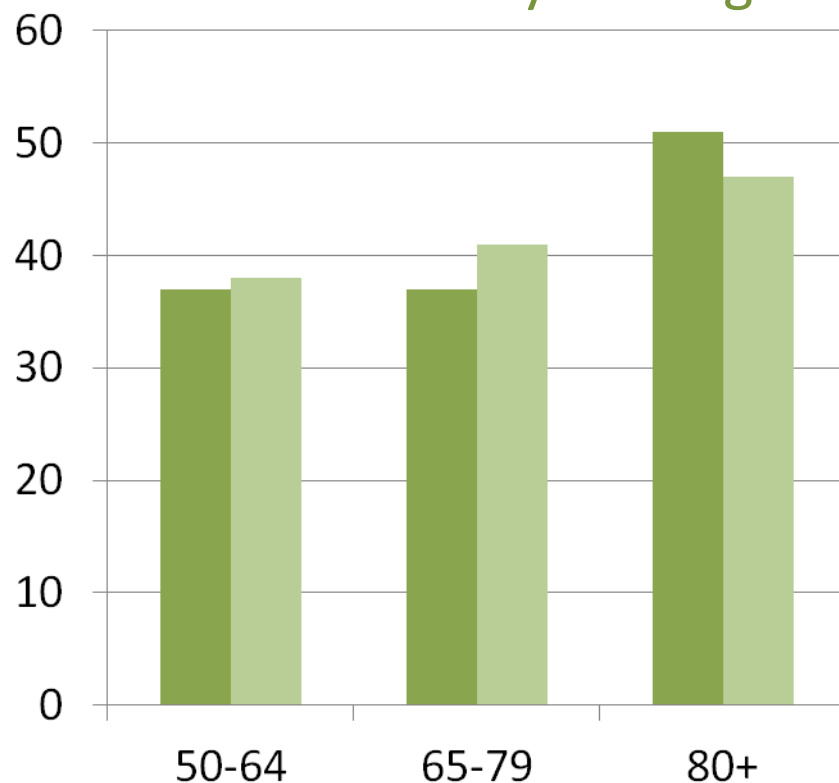
Loneliness: A part of 'normal' ageing? expectations



% agreeing old age is a time of loneliness



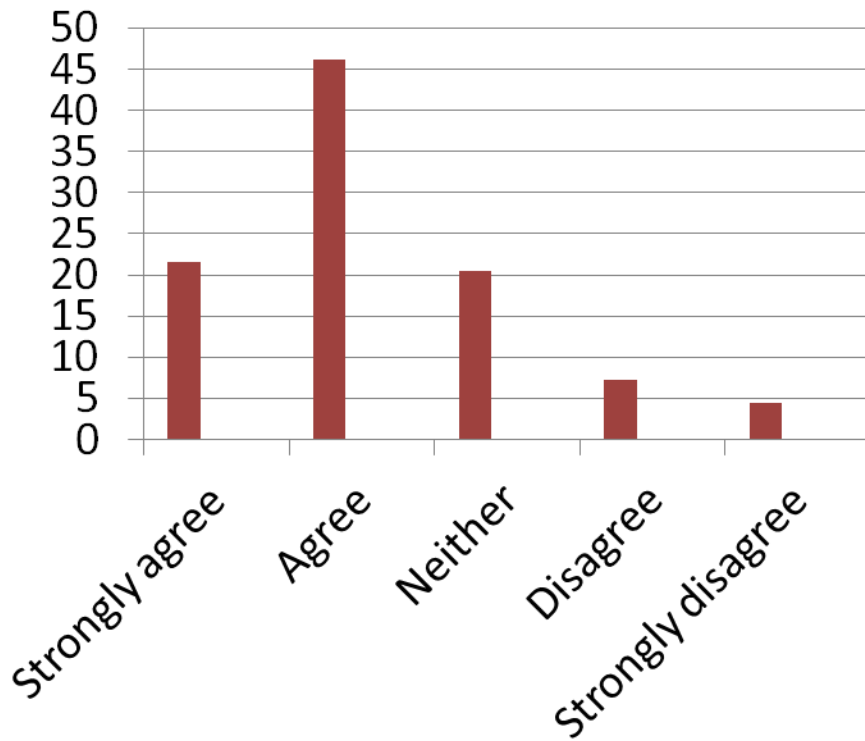
% expecting to get more lonely with age



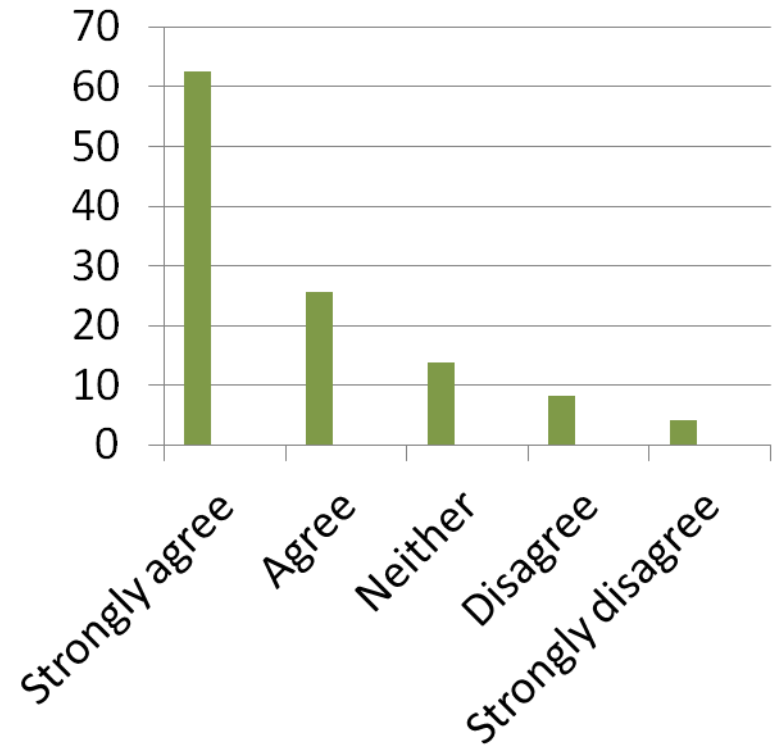
Source: ELSA wave 2

Do expectations matter?

Old age is
a time of loneliness



I expect
to become lonely



Loneliness at wave 5-8 years later

Trajectories of loneliness over time

In longitudinal studies with more than 1 follow up we can identify 5 distinct trajectories

- Never lonely
- Always lonely
- Increasing loneliness (new onset and increase in severity)
- Decreasing loneliness (out of loneliness or reduction in severity)
- Fluctuating pattern (if more than 2 follow up points)



Trajectories of loneliness: Self rating scale



Loneliness pathway	Changes over 10 years (%)	Changes over 1 year (%)
Never lonely	70	59
Always lonely	1	14
Out of loneliness	4	10
Into loneliness	5	10
Fluctuating	20	7

Change=1 change + or – in rating scale over 5 follow up points

Risk groups-what do they really tell us?

% Widowed in ELSA reporting loneliness (CES-D measure)

	All	Males	Females
W1	34.1	39.2	32.8
W2	32.7	37.0	31.5
W3	33.2	35.6	32.5
W4	31.2	33.7	30.5
W5	33.2	33.2	33.2
W6	27.9	29.4	27.5

Widowhood and loneliness

	W3	W4	W5	W6
Widowed between W1 & 2				
% lonely	47%	34%	34%	19%
Widowed between W4 & 5				47%



Seasonal variations in loneliness

*"I think probably winter, everyone will say that"
(Loneliness is greatest in winter)*

Campaign to
End Loneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE

Loneliness and the elderly

51% of over 75s

Live alone

800,000+

"Chronically lonely" in England

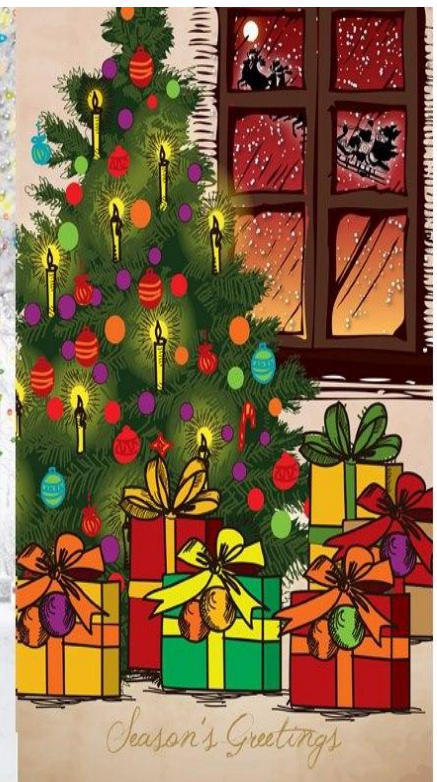
About 5m

Rely on TV for company

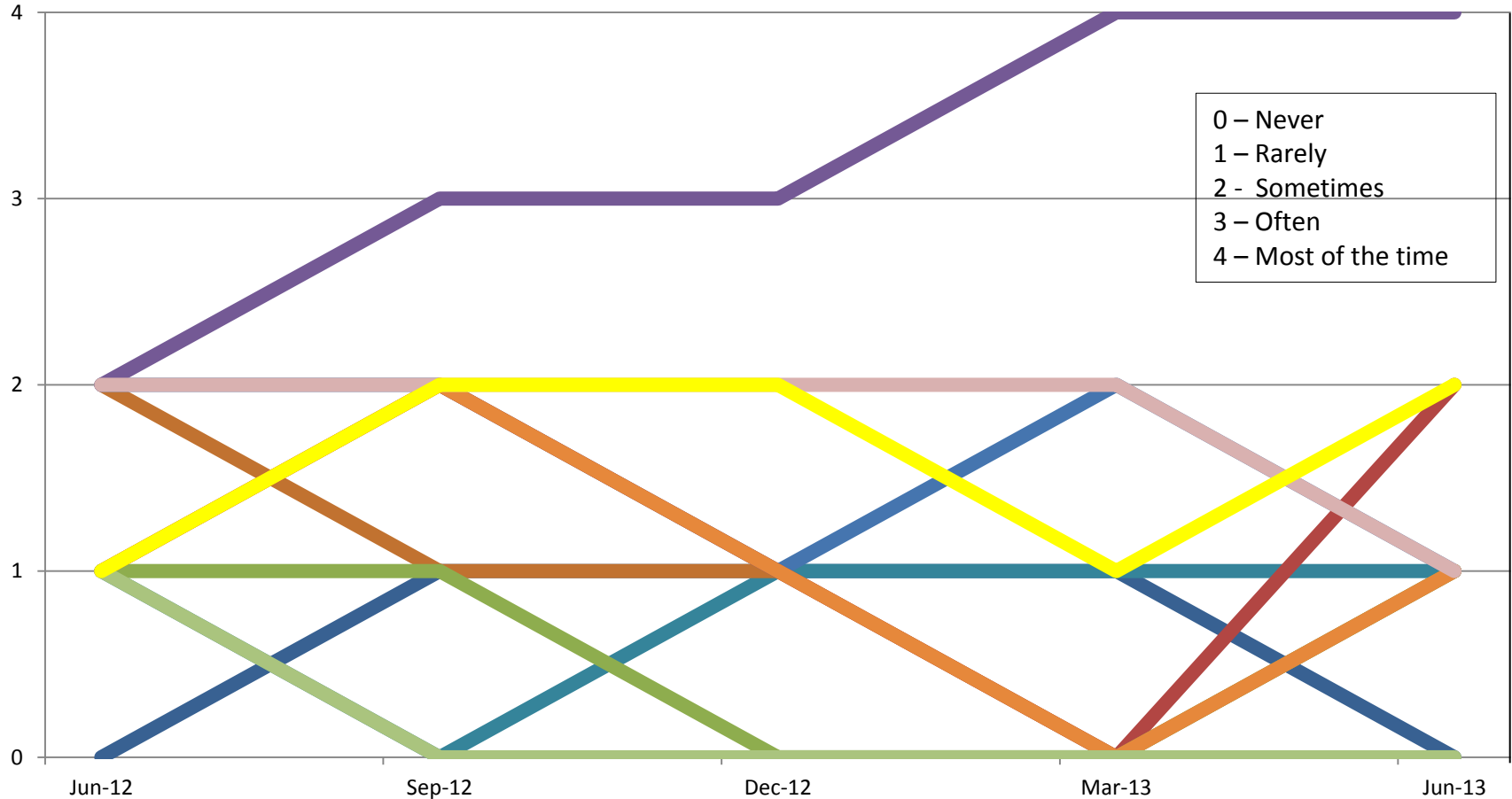
450,000 of over 65s

Alone for Christmas

Source: Campaign to End Loneliness and Age UK



**“Loneliness is not at a given time.
It comes and it goes.” (73 yr old widow)**



Expectations of loneliness by season

	Winter
Summer, W1	50.0%
Autumn, W2	38.5%
Winter, W3	50.0%
Spring, W4	75.0%
Summer, W5	33.3%



Are we asking the wrong questions?

- Most people are not lonely in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies
- Risk factor studies identify groups (e.g. the widowed) – can tell us who but not why
- Risk factors not homogeneous-why do some widows experience loneliness and others do not?
- Challenge the ageist stereotypes about loneliness?
- Loneliness not just a ‘problem’ for older people and not just at Christmas!

Campaign to
End Loneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE



Acknowledgements



- Participants in our trajectories of loneliness study
- Professor Geoff Rodgers, VP Research, Brunel University London for funding the trajectories of loneliness study
- Rachel Woodbridge, PhD student
- Dr Mary Pat Sullivan, co-investigator on the trajectories of loneliness study
- Dr Jitka Pikhartova for the analysis of ELSA data
- ESRC for funding the analysis of ELSA: grant reference ES/K004077/1
- All errors are mine!
- christina.victor@brunel.ac.uk

