



Research Bulletin - 7th Edition, August 2013

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 second in a series of short essays on the theme controversies and gaps in loneliness research. Each article addresses current areas of debate and identifies gaps in the research into loneliness and isolation from the angle of the author's particular research interest. Designed to establish a debate 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](#).

Controversies and gaps in loneliness research

Creating connection and shared knowledge with digital tools: research trends within elderly populations

Professor Charles Crook and Xin Gao, Learning Sciences Research Institute, University of Nottingham

Technology- supported communication involving the elderly has become a significant research topic: part of the wider campaign to confront loneliness. This short article outlines some recent trends, illustrates some of the challenges facing research in digital communication and invokes a personal project in this area, [Shared Walk](#).

This article recognises that simply making the internet available within elderly communities – even with careful and lengthy induction – does not promise a substantial impact by itself (e.g., Mellor et al, 2008). It considers research that show how the internet can instead be directed towards particular social interactional opportunities.

There is plenty of debate and gaps in the research into digital technology, communication and loneliness in older age. For many digital services – including Facebook, Skype, email and Twitter – a study can be found that shows them be successfully used. On the other hand, it is hard to find

evidence that any of them have been adopted on a scale that suggests they can be regarded as a transformative force in respect to loneliness among the elderly.

The article recommends a new kind of research that needs to be more actively cultivated if elderly populations are to be enabled to use digital communication tools to communicate and address loneliness and isolation. In particular, we need a better understanding of those tools in terms of: (1) the design challenge and (2) the induction challenge. That is, we need to understand what designs of tool will best fit the communication preferences of this population and, then, what forms of support will help them acquire confidence and interest in those tools.

A full version of this article can be [downloaded here](#).

Charles Crook is Professor of ICT and Education. He is Director of the Learning Sciences Research Institute at Nottingham and is a developmental psychologist by background. After research at Cambridge, Brown and Strathclyde Universities, he lectured in Psychology at Durham University and was Reader in Psychology at Loughborough University. Much of this work implicates new technology. He was a founder member of the European Society for Developmental Psychology.

Xin Gao is a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nottingham. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the university, for which she investigated what motivates students to learn English as a foreign language in China. Xin is a Course Leader for the MA Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL).

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).

News from the Research Hub

■ **British Society of Gerontology Roundtable (11 September 2013)**

The Campaign to End Loneliness Research Hub will be holding a roundtable at the 2013 British Society of Gerontology conference in Oxford on the 11th of September. *Loneliness: Controversies in Research* will facilitate attendees to debate the gaps and controversies that need more attention in loneliness research, practice and policy.

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 Cattam and Christina Victor, and Dr Barbara Hanratty, will all present on controversies from their recent research. If you are attending the BSG conference, we hope you will join us at our roundtable.

■ **Swedish Conference: Loneliness and social isolation among older people – research perspectives on experienced loneliness and social isolation (23-24 September 2013)**

The National Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life (NISAL) at Linköping University will host *Loneliness and social isolation among older people – research perspectives on experienced loneliness*

and social isolation in Norrköping, Sweden on the 23 – 24 September 2013, at which the Campaign and various Research Hub members have been invited to present.

The inter-disciplinary conference will allow the sharing of knowledge and different perspectives on loneliness in later life, using information from regional, national and international projects, policy and research.

Co-Chairs of the Research Hub, Professor Mima Cattan and Professor Christina Victor will be speaking at the conference. The Campaign to End Loneliness will make a presentation about evidence-based campaigning around the issue of loneliness in older age. Further information can be found [here](#) and registration can be completed [here](#).

■ Research Hub Meeting (20 August 2013)

The second Research Hub meeting of 2013 will be held in London on the 20th of August. Members from UCL, Brunel University and Age UK will present on their current work, which addresses current gaps or areas of debate in loneliness research.

The meeting is now at full capacity, but if you'd like to receive minutes and presentation details, please email Anna Goodman (anna@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk).

■ Connect + Act (19 June 2013)

On the 19th of June, the Campaign to End Loneliness hosted Connect + Act, a sold-out conference on the issue of loneliness in older age. The event was an action-oriented and collaborative learning experience bringing together both policy experts and our campaign supporters who work directly with older people.

Research Hub Co-Chair, Professor Mima Cattan, and Hub member Dr Barbara Hanratty both spoke at the event alongside Minister for Care Services, Norman Lamb MP and representatives from the Department of Health and Public Health England. Hub members, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, attended and led discussions during an Open Space session.

A short video summary of the day can be viewed on the [Campaign to End Loneliness website](#).

New research into loneliness and social isolation

■ Stickley, A., Koyanagi, A., Roberts, B., Richardson, E., Abbott, P., Tumanov, S., and McKee, M. (2013) Loneliness: its Correlates and Association with Health Behaviours and Outcomes in Nine Countries of the Former Soviet Union *PLoS ONE* 8 (7)

Research suggests that the prevalence of loneliness varies between countries and that feeling lonely may be associated with poorer health behaviours and outcomes. The aim of the current study was to examine the factors associated with loneliness, and the relationship between feeling lonely and health behaviours and outcomes in the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) – a region where loneliness has been little studied to date.

Using data from 18,000 respondents collected during a cross-sectional survey undertaken in nine FSU countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine – in 2010/11, country-wise logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine: the factors associated with feeling lonely; the association between feeling lonely and alcohol consumption, hazardous drinking and smoking; and whether feeling lonely was linked to poorer health (i.e. poor self-rated health and psychological distress).

The prevalence of loneliness varied widely among the countries. Being divorced/widowed and low social support were associated with loneliness in all of the countries, while other factors (e.g. living alone, low locus of control) were linked to loneliness in some of the countries. Feeling lonely was connected with hazardous drinking in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Russia but with smoking only in Kyrgyzstan. Loneliness was associated with psychological distress in all of the countries and poor self-rated health in every country except Kazakhstan and Moldova.

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0067978>

■ **Stone, J., Evandrou, M. and Falkingham, J. (2013) The transition to living alone and psychological distress in later life *Age and Ageing* 42 (3) pp. 366-372**

Living alone in later life has been linked to psychological distress but less is known about the role of the transition into living alone and the role of social and material resources. Using data from 4,587 participants aged of 65 of the British Household Panel Survey, this research analysed trajectories of living arrangements classified as: consistently partnered / with children / alone / transition from partnered to alone / with children to alone. It uses the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) as a measure of psychological distress and used a multi-level logistic regression to control for sex, age, activities of daily living and social and material resources.

The research found that living alone in later life is not in itself a strong risk factor for psychological distress. The effects of transitions to living alone are dependent on the preceding living arrangement and are independent of social and material resources.

When an individual made the transition from “partnered” to “alone” the odds for psychological distress increased substantially in the first year. One year later this risk had declined and by the third year was not statistically significant. The transition from “with children” to “alone” reduced the odds for psychological distress in the first year but the risk then increased in the years following this transition. None of the covariates explained these associations.

<http://ageing.oxfordjournals.org/content/42/3/366.abstract>

■ **Collins, T. (2013) Remembering the past, looking to the future: Christmas as a symbol of change in later life widowhood *Ageing and Society FirstView Article* pp. 1- 25**

Many older women experience the loss of a spouse or partner in later life. This paper explores older women's experiences of Christmas in order to locate process and meaning in relation to the transition of later life widowhood. Drawing on longitudinal data, derived from three in-depth

interviews conducted over 18 months with 26 older widows, this paper presents a number of themes from the women's accounts of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards.

The importance of continuity, social relations and autonomy is situated in three emergent themes: 'Family, intergenerational ties and tradition', 'Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity' and 'Personal continuity and activation'. The findings, including the positive aspects of continuity and discontinuity, demonstrate that Christmas is a potent symbol of both personal and social transformation during later life widowhood, and that the management of transition incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency and flexibility.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8924700>

■ **Hoban, M., James, V., Beresford, P. and Fleming, J. 2013. *Involving Older Age: The route to twenty-first century well-being* (Cardiff: Royal Voluntary Service)**

Shaping our Age was a three year research and development project supported by the Big Lottery Research Programme and a partnership between WRVS (now Royal Voluntary Service); the Centre for Citizen Participation at Brunel University and the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University. The project aimed to connect and interweave two key concerns: improving older people's well-being and increasing their involvement while providing new insights into emerging issues around ageing.

The research began in early 2011 with a nationwide consultation programme involving a diverse range of 163 older people (aged 65+) in focus groups and qualitative individual interviews. The second phase involved recruiting four Involvement Workers to facilitate projects in five local WRVS services, which were then evaluated.

The final report from *Shaping our Age* summarises 7 'Key Findings' and makes recommendations for services for involving older people to improve their wellbeing. The second key finding was: "social connectedness was by far the most strongly voiced and frequently mentioned aspect shaping well-being". It recommends that services consider how existing relationships within health and social care provision can be made "more humanistic and more closely tied to how older people may define their own well-being".

<http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/shapingourage>

■ **Briefing: Understanding the Oldest Old (International Longevity Centre UK)**

Using data from Understanding Society survey, the ILC-UK and the Personal Finance Research Centre have published a new briefing on the oldest old (85+ age group) and their levels of participation, wellbeing and health. The briefing is part of a major project exploring the financial dimensions of wellbeing and wider quality of life measures in older age and is published as part of an ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative. They found:

- More than one in ten (13 per cent) of the oldest old reported not having any friends
- But, over eight in ten of the oldest old (81 per cent) felt they could rely on family 'a lot'

- Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of the oldest old felt that their health limited even moderate activities, and about a half felt that pain had interfered with their activities over the past few weeks
- 26% of people aged 85 and over reported being “at least” somewhat dissatisfied with their life overall

http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication_details/understanding_the_oldest_old

■ **Oguz, S., Merad, S., and Snape, D. (2013) *Measuring National Well-being – What matters most to Personal Well-being?* (London: Office for National Statistics)**

This article uses data from the Annual Population Survey collected between April 2011 and March 2012 which includes measures of personal well-being. It describes the results of regression analysis – a statistical technique which analyses variation in well-being outcomes by specific characteristics and circumstances of individuals while holding all other characteristics equal. Comparisons are made between two people who are otherwise the same in every respect apart from the particular characteristic or circumstance being considered. This helps to isolate the effect of any specific characteristic or circumstance on personal well-being.

This analysis examined the effect of relationships on wellbeing, and concludes:

- Living alone is negatively related to our personal well-being, regardless of relationship status. Households with one occupant gave lower ratings for ‘life satisfaction’
- The size of association between relationship status and personal well-being is considered “moderate”
- People who are widowed, divorced or separated and living alone have, on average, lower wellbeing scores than married people or those in in a civil partnership

http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_312125.pdf

■ **Grant, J. (2013) *Getting On...with life: Baby boomers, mental health and ageing well* (London: Mental Health Foundation)**

The Mental Health Foundation’s latest report, *Getting On...with life*, looks at how our baby boomer generation can maintain good mental health as they age. Those born between 1946 and 1955 are a unique and diverse group: growing up during post-war austerity and then becoming young adults during a time of significant economic, political and social liberalisation and change.

Using interviews, national surveys and the English Longitudinal Study of ageing (ELSA), the report highlights some new challenges and opportunities for services and commissioners as they plan how to support this generation to stay healthy and connected in later life. Findings include:

- Baby boomers are likely to become carers in large numbers
- The risks posed by family breakdown and community disengagement are significant
- Baby boomers have little awareness about protecting their mental wellbeing

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/getting-on-full-report/>

■ **Gardner, P. (2010) Older Adults and OATS Computer Training Programs: A Social Impact Analysis (The New York Academy of Medicine)**

Paul Cann, a member of the Research Hub, recommended that this evaluation of a computer training service, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) in New York was included in this edition.

The goal of this study was to explore how participation in the OATS computer-training program impacts the lives of older adults. One of four objectives of the evaluation was to assess the impact the program had on health and well-being of participants, as measured by changes in social connectedness, access to information and social and civic participation. A mixed-method research design was adopted and the study took place across four study sites in New York City over an eight-month period. Data were collected using three strategies – telephone surveys, ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with service providers.

Analysis found that the OATS course had a positive impact on social connectedness, access to information and social participation of participants:

- 64% of participants reported that the amount of time they spent communicating with friends and family increased as a result of the OATS training
- In the post-course survey, 89% reported that their ability to access information increased as a result of the training (56% significantly increased; 33% somewhat increased)
- 44% felt their awareness of social activities had increased as a result of the OATS training and 24% reported that the number of social activities they participated in had increased

<http://oats.org/files/NYAM%20Study%20Final.pdf>

Future research

■ **Social connections and wellbeing in older adults – Dr Aparna Shankar, Dr Snorri Bjorn Rafnsson and Professor Andrew Steptoe, UCL**

Whether individuals attain a high level of wellbeing (e.g. whether they are satisfied with their lives) has become an important focus for health and social policy in general, and in relation to the elderly in particular. Wellbeing has been linked to ideas about active ageing as well as independent living in old age. Maintaining high levels of wellbeing into old age is thought to be an important aspect of successful ageing.

Much research has focussed on investigating the relationships between different measures of wellbeing (e.g. life satisfaction, quality of life) and those aspects of life that frequently show increased risk of loss and decline with advanced age, including health and competence, financial independence, and frequency and quality of social contacts.

While the social relationships are understood to be associated with greater wellbeing in all ages, associations among older adults may be particularly complex. In addition, a number of methodological challenges exist regarding the measurement and definition of social connections and

wellbeing concepts that have restricted the comparability of findings across different studies and also produced contradictory results. Furthermore, much of the research on social relationships and wellbeing is limited by its cross-sectional nature and there is currently little longitudinal information available to help us e.g. understand the trajectories of change in social connections and wellbeing in older people.

This on-going research examines both cross-sectionally and longitudinally the influence of loneliness and diverse social network characteristics on different measures of subjective wellbeing among elderly persons in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, the Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe and the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India, studies which all have rich and comparable data on multiple aspects of individuals' wellbeing and social relationships.

For more information and queries, please contact Dr. Aparna Shankar (aparna.shankar@ucl.ac.uk) or Dr. Snorri Bjorn Rafnsson (s.rafnsson@ucl.ac.uk), UCL Research Department of Epidemiology and Public Health.

Contribute to the Research Hub

If you would like to contribute to the next Research Bulletin please contact Anna Goodman (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

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