

Loneliness and community: What can (must) we change?

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Content

- What is loneliness and why do we care
- What are we doing about this problem?
- Problems with the dominant approach
- Changing the narrative
- The example of gender
- Conclusions



What is loneliness and why do we care?

What is loneliness?

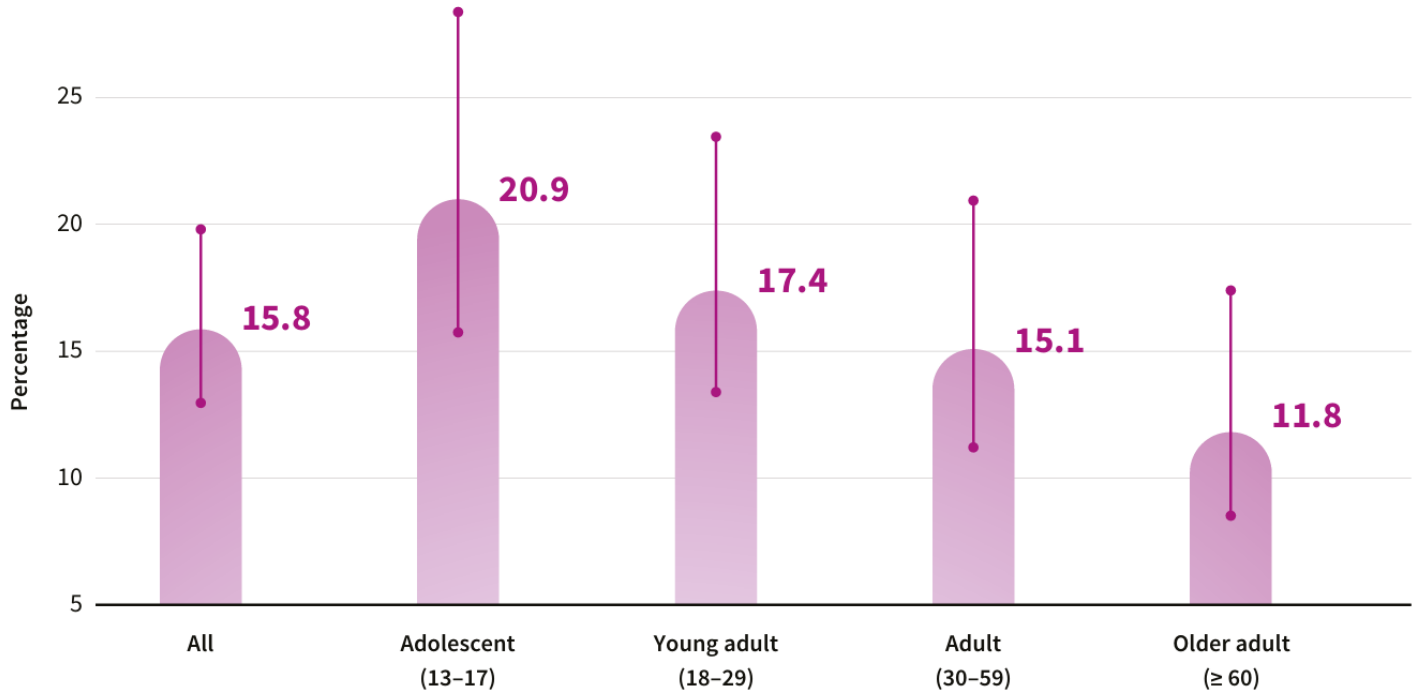


- An aversive feeling that results from the discrepancy between the quantity or quality of our actual and desired social relationships (Peplau & Perlman,1982)
- An experienced lack of empathic understanding (Jung, 1961)
- “the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody” (Arendt, 1966).
- “When you cannot find someone to help you, to share your sorrow” (14-16 year olds, Fit to Belong project)

Why do we care?

- Prevalent at all ages
- Globally, more prevalent among young people
- But careful over-interpreting feeling versus identifying or admitting to feeling
- Not clear if it is increasing or not

Fig. 2.
Global prevalence (%) of loneliness by age group, 2014–2023 (with 95% uncertainty intervals)



WHO, 2025

Why do we care?

- Significant impact on individuals
  - Physical health: e.g., accelerated disease progression
  - Mental health: e.g., Depression, anxiety
  - Early mortality
  - Educational attainment

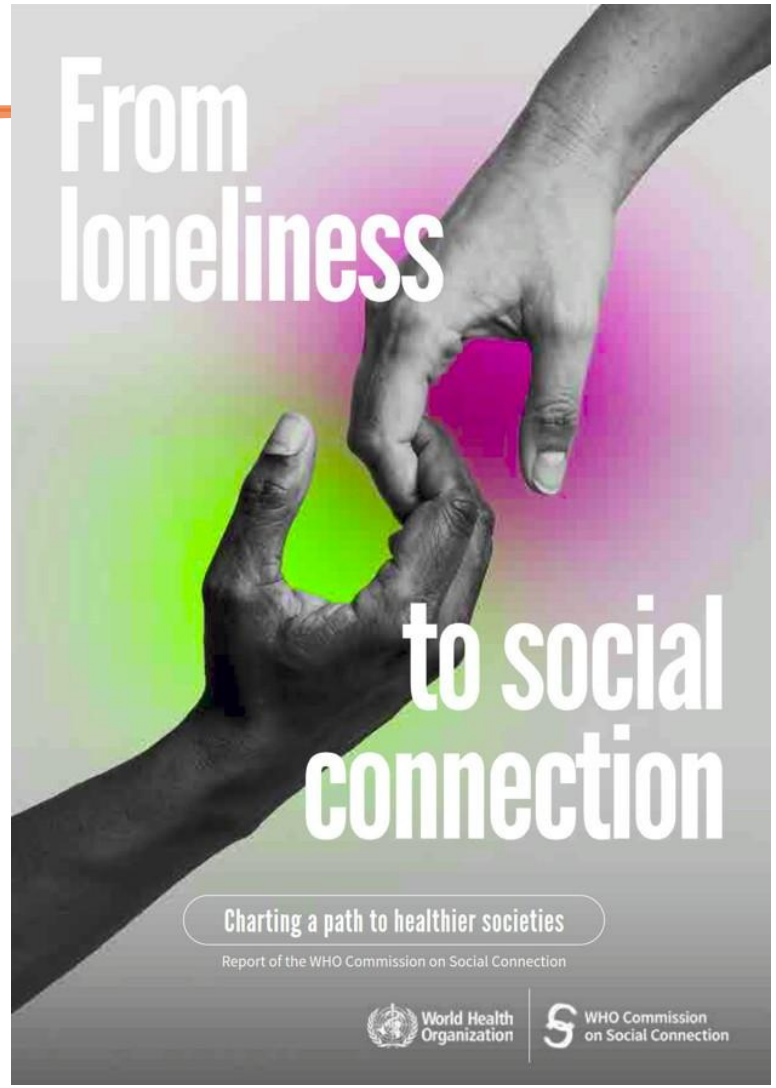
- Significant impact/costs to employers, society, and democracy:
  - Health service costs
  - Unemployment, absenteeism and low productivity
  - Voting patterns



Why do we care?

- Public Health Priority (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017)
  - Often misunderstood to mean it affects a lot of people and has a lot of health consequences…

- WHO: Case for action “from policy-makers, researchers, and all sectors to treat social health with the same urgency as physical and mental health.”



What are we doing about this problem?

And does it work?

So what are we doing about this?

Most common interventions:

- Social / emotional skills training
- Psychological therapies
- Social network interventions
- Social support interventions

But:

-very modest effectiveness: at best, moderate effects

-very little work on **prevention**

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

American Psychologist

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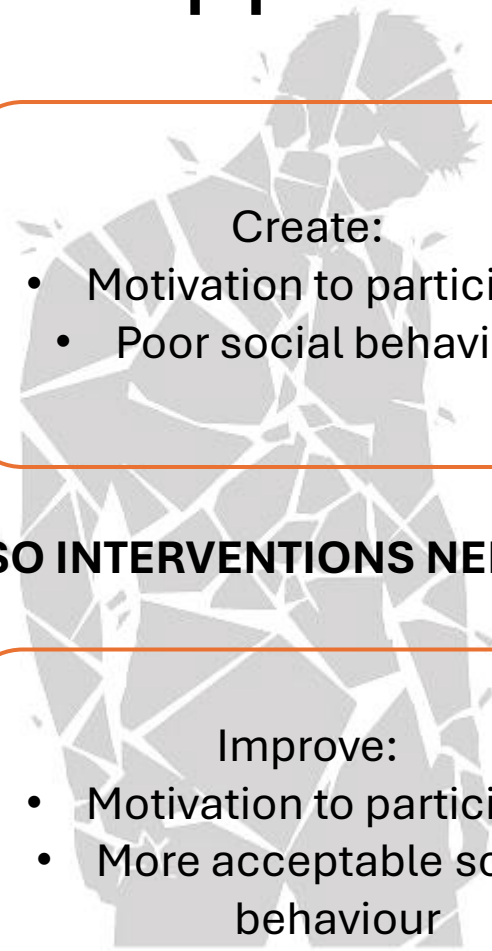
2026, Vol. 81, No. 1, 36–52
https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001578

Are Loneliness Interventions Effective for Reducing Loneliness? A Meta-Analytic Review of 280 Studies

Mathias Lasgaard[1, 2], Pamela Qualter[3], Claus Løvschall[1], Lisbeth Mølgaard Laustsen[1, 4], Michelle H. Lim[5, 6], Sigrid Engelbrecht Sjøl[1], Lauren Burke[3], Emely Ek Blæhr[1, 7], Helle Terkildsen Maindal[8], Anne-Sofie Hargaard[1], Robin Christensen[9, 10, 11], and Julie Christiansen[1, 2]

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[8] Department of Public Health, Aarhus University
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[11] Cochrane Denmark and Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine Odense, Department of Clinical Research, University of Southern Denmark

Why? The dominant approach…



Individual deficits:
- Social skills
- Mental health
- Physical health

Create:
- Motivation to participate
- Poor social behaviour

Loneliness

SO INTERVENTIONS NEED TO:

Fix the individual
- Improving social skills, mental health
- Getting them out of the house/connected

Improve:
- Motivation to participate
- More acceptable social behaviour

Reduced loneliness

The problems with the dominant approach

Spoiler: It does not work...

The dominant narrative…

- … increases loneliness:
  - It blames and stigmatizes individuals for the loneliness they feel
  - Loneliness stigma, in turn, increases loneliness and reduces their motivation to reach out for help

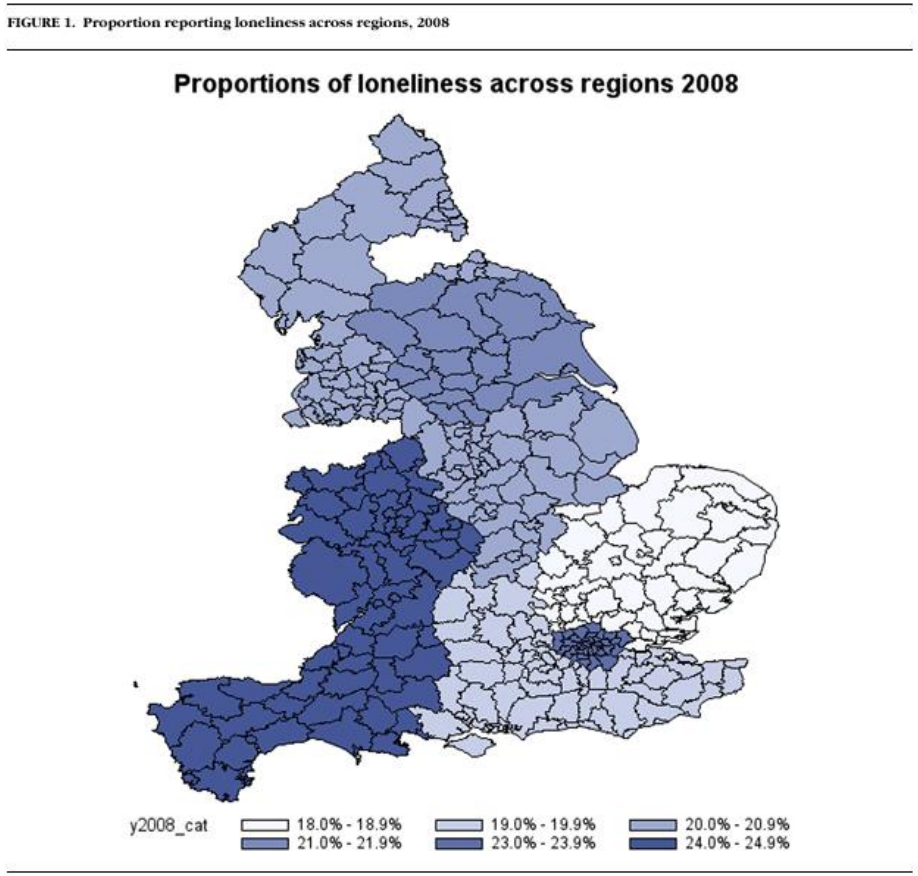
- … neglects systematic variation:
  - Loneliness is socially patterned and this is not explained by individual level models



Loneliness inequalities

- Regional patterning (Li et al., 2024): estimates vary across regions, even within the same country, using the same measure and language to assess loneliness

FIGURE 1. Proportion reporting loneliness across regions, 2008



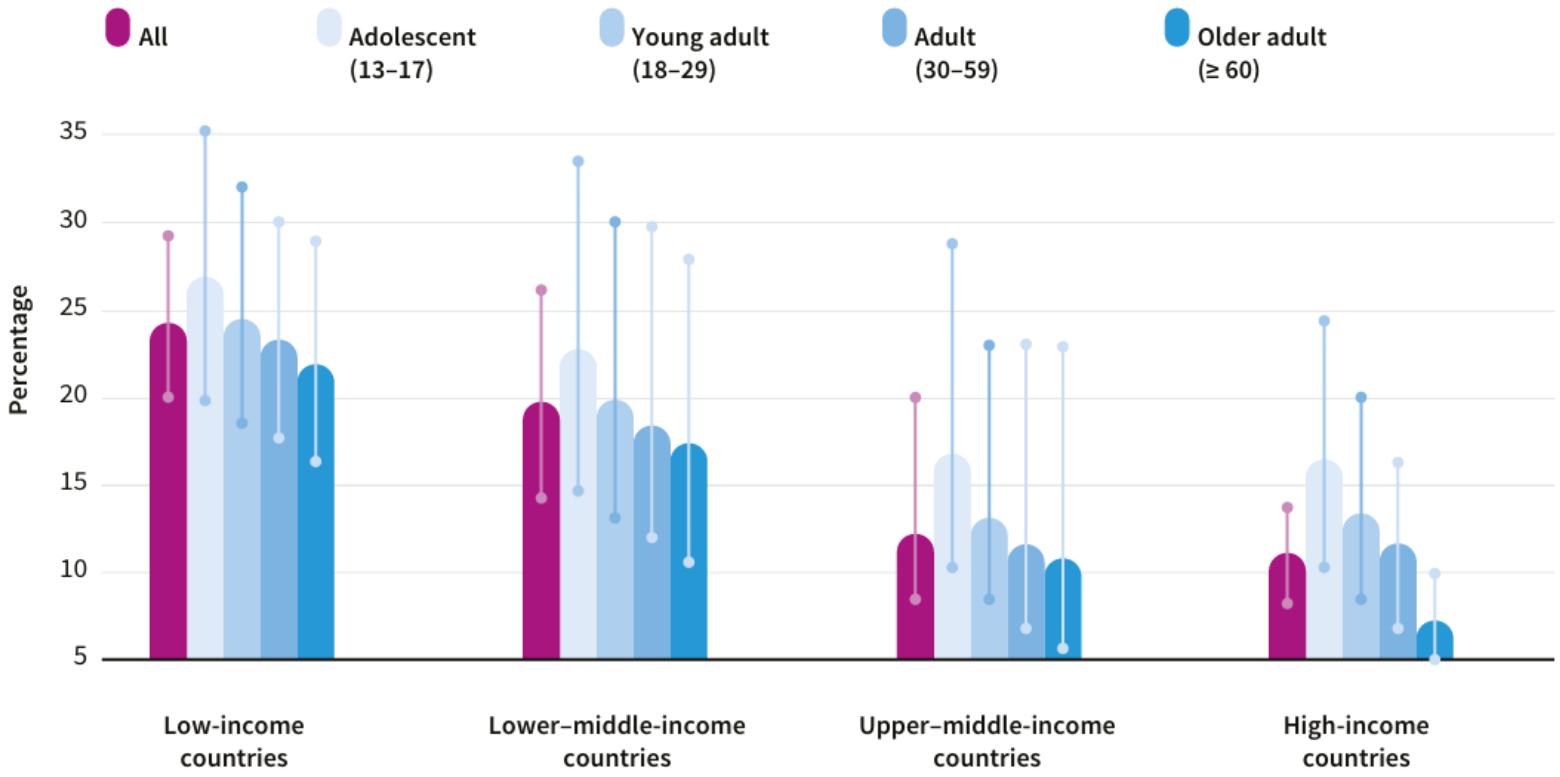
WHO, 2025

Loneliness inequalities

- Patterned by community deprivation: The lower the country's income, the more prevalent loneliness is

Fig. 5.

Global prevalence (%) of loneliness by World Bank country income group, 2014–2023 (with 95% uncertainty intervals)



WHO, 2025

Loneliness inequalities

- Most prevalent in
  - Migrants
  - Racial and ethnic minorities
  - Gender minorities
  - Sexual minorities
  - Mental health status
  - Disability and chronic illness
  - Poverty and unemployment



Migrants

Gap migrant/non-migrant largest with larger difference from host society: culture, age of migration, migrant generation

I was feeling alienated. My loneliness was a painful and disturbing realisation of being unaccepted and unloved, of being alone and having no other choice…

Participant in a study with migrants living in London (Christodoulou, 2015)



Racial and ethnic minorities

Gaps at all ages, with intersections with older age, illness, and migration status

I experienced racism a lot… people posted abusive messages through the door, I felt very unwelcome and that was why I was so lonely and depressed.

African woman in her 50s in British Red Cross (2019)



Sexual and gender minorities

Consistent gaps: And more so for bisexual and asexual individuals and those still exploring sexual or gender identity

I have a group of friends, I came out to them as a lesbian about a year ago but ever since then, everything's changed if I'm being honest.

14-year-old participant in Verity et al. (2022)



Mental health status

Bidirectional association/cycle, but evidence less clear for disorders other than depression and anxiety

When I suffered from anorexia, it fed into so many areas of my life. It was all consuming. One of those areas was loneliness. (…) Going out with friends always involved meals out or drinks and I was too scared.

Michelle in Mumford (2016)



Disability and chronic illness

Consistent gaps: Larger in older age, ethnic minorities, and those living in more deprived areas

I was gradually becoming more and more aware of my loneliness and began to long for a friend. All my classmates had at least one and most had several. I would spend hours at night awake in bed looking up at the ceiling and imagining what it might be like to be friends with somebody.

Unnamed autistic participant in Tammet (2006)



Poverty and unemployment

- Unemployment: Consistent gap, more pronounced between 30-34 and 50-59.

- SES: Consistent, irrespective of whether determined objectively or subjectively, or at individual, family, or neighbourhood levels.



Inequalities are mentioned but not understood

- Inequalities dealt in policy with by identifying certain groups as more at risk or vulnerable
- Influencing political agenda for the prioritisation of preventive and corrective efforts
- But this is still individualising the problem…

Key groups at risk of loneliness

- Young people, with younger age groups progressively more likely to be lonely than people in the oldest age group (aged 65 or over);
- Those with poor mental wellbeing;
- People with a disability or long-standing health problem;
- People not living with a partner (either married or cohabiting);
- Gay, lesbian, or bisexual people and people who chose 'other' when asked about their sexual orientation;
- People on lower incomes (those in the two poorest quintiles, compared to those in the wealthiest quintile);
- People who were out of work;
- Those who have recently moved to their current address; and
- Women, who were at greater risk of loneliness than men.

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
Department for Culture, Media & Sport

Research and analysis

Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England

Published 12 June 2022

Applies to England

“At risk” groups?

Pergamon

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RISKY BUSINESS: THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF AIDS RISK GROUPS

NINA GLICK SCHILLER, STEPHEN CRYSTAL and DENVER LEWELLEN



American Political Science Review

Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy

Published online by Cambridge University Press: **02 September 2013**

Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram

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Critical Policy Studies, 2013
Vol. 7, No. 2, 155–176, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.799880

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Constructing at-risk target groups

Marie Østergaard Møller* and Gitte Sommer Harrits

Department of Political Science and Government, University of Aarhus, Denmark

This article explores the political legitimatization of intervention toward at-risk target groups in Danish preventive policy. Here, the overall intention is to detect social problems before they occur. Part of these preventive policies is the emergence of at-risk target groups identified as potential deviants among ‘the normal population’ of chil-

The Semantics of State Policy Making: The Case of “At Risk”

Margaret L. Placier
University of Missouri–Columbia

Definitions of key policy terms are important elements in policy construction. Accordingly, the power to define such terms is a linguistic marker of relationships among players in the policy process. Combining a linguistic framework with the cultural framework of Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1989), this article traces definition of the term at risk *in the context of one state, Arizona. Researchers in the Department of Education used the definition process as an oppor-*

“At risk” groups?

- Deterministic: Inevitable link Group→ Loneliness

  - Not all members of these groups feel lonely
  - More loneliness in some **conditions** than in others
  - Resources, assets, and protective factors within groups

  - Whole groups seen as “at risk of potentially *developing* special needs”



Doyle, Barreto, & Qualter (in press)

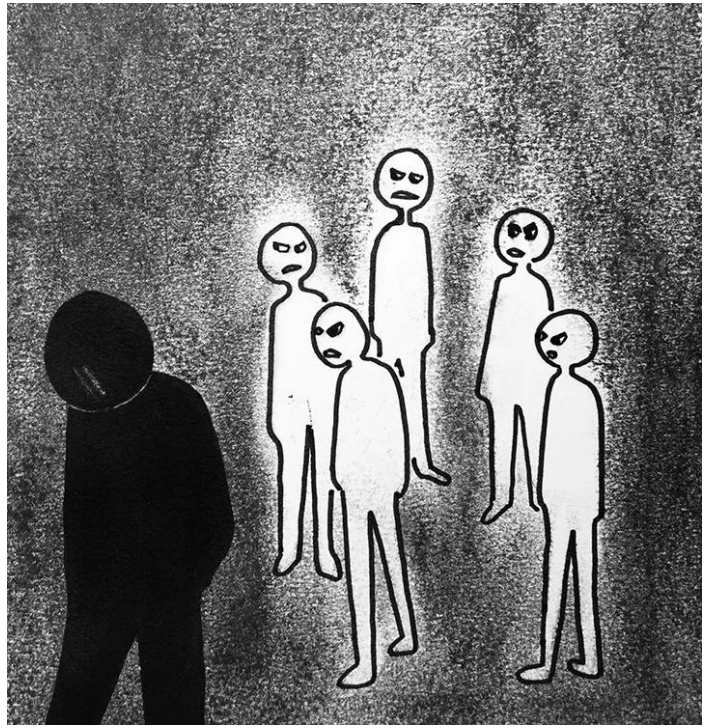
“At risk” groups?

Stigmatizing:

- Something about the group that causes loneliness: Deficit
- Blame: From “risk groups” to “risky behaviour”
- The social construction of normality and deviance: “Othering:” separation between the healthy/normal and the sick/deviant

Patronizing:

- Creation of new target groups that are portrayed as deviant, incapable of taking care of themselves, and requiring extra help in health and social care—legitimizing power differentials

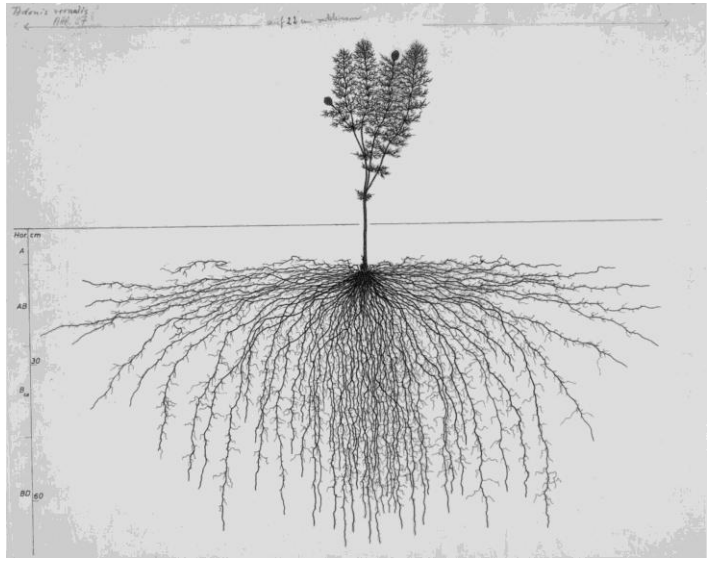


Doyle, Barreto, & Qualter (in press)

“At risk” groups?

Unhelpful:

- Factors as ‘groups’ are unmodifiable
- Obscures root causes
- Justifies inertia/doing nothing
- Preventive and corrective are mistargeted



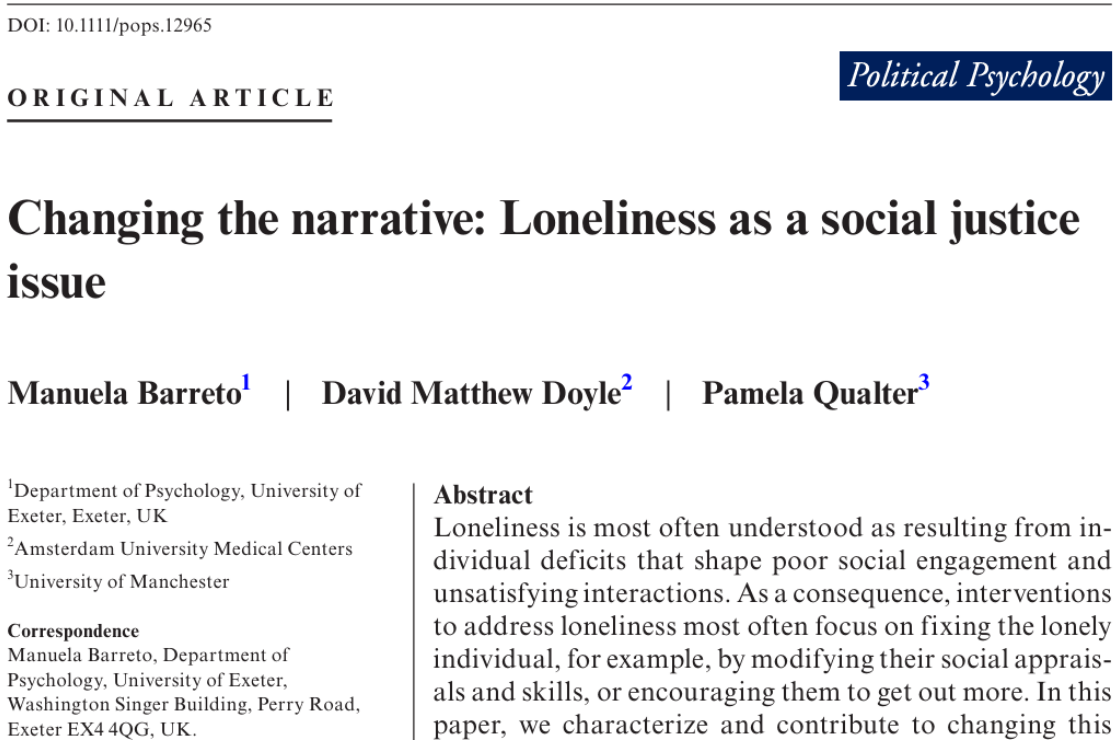
Doyle, Barreto, & Qualter (in press)

We need to change the narrative

Understand loneliness drivers so we can effectively prevent and address it

What needs to change

- Attend to **root causes and mechanisms** at multiple levels of analysis, including the social and structural determinants of loneliness…
- which are also more **modifiable**…
- target more people in one go…
- and can **prevent** rather than just ‘cure’ loneliness



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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Political Psychology

Changing the narrative: Loneliness as a social justice issue

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[2]Amsterdam University Medical Centers

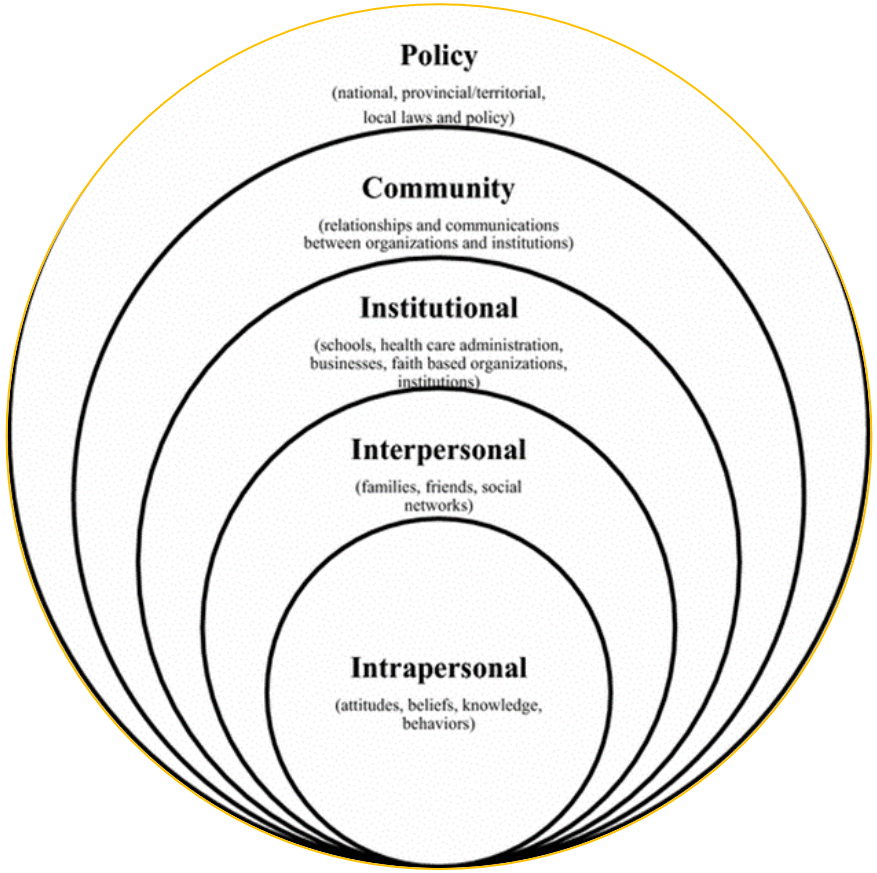
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Manuela Barreto, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, Washington Singer Building, Perry Road, Exeter EX4 4QG, UK.

Abstract

Loneliness is most often understood as resulting from individual deficits that shape poor social engagement and unsatisfying interactions. As a consequence, interventions to address loneliness most often focus on fixing the lonely individual, for example, by modifying their social appraisals and skills, or encouraging them to get out more. In this paper, we characterize and contribute to changing this

The social ecology of loneliness

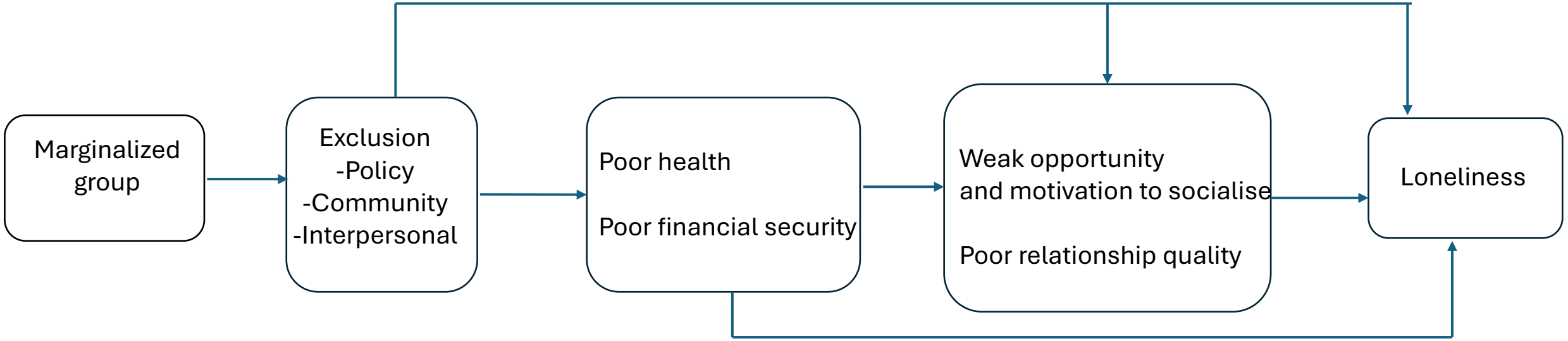




- Potential for exclusion at all levels
- Potential for improvements at all levels

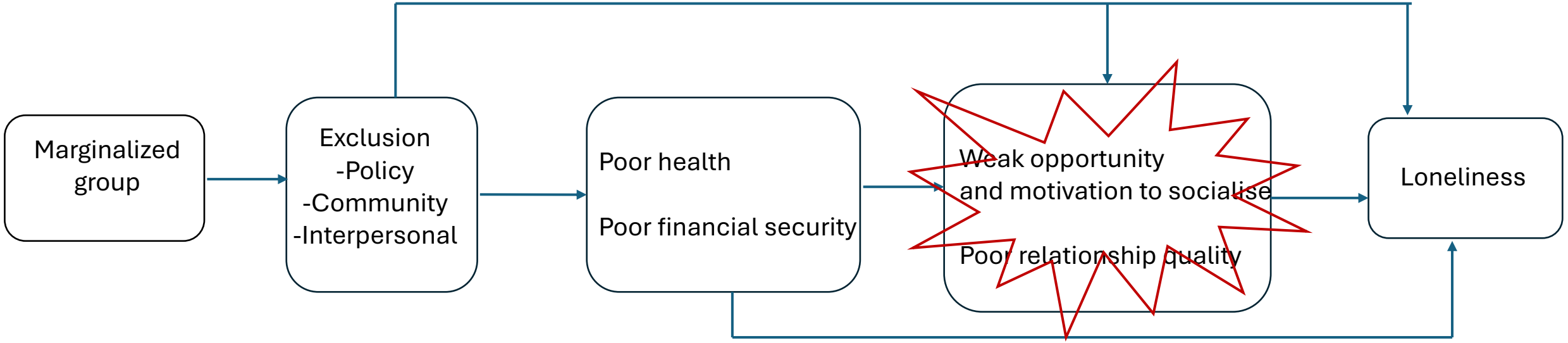
Root and proximal causes





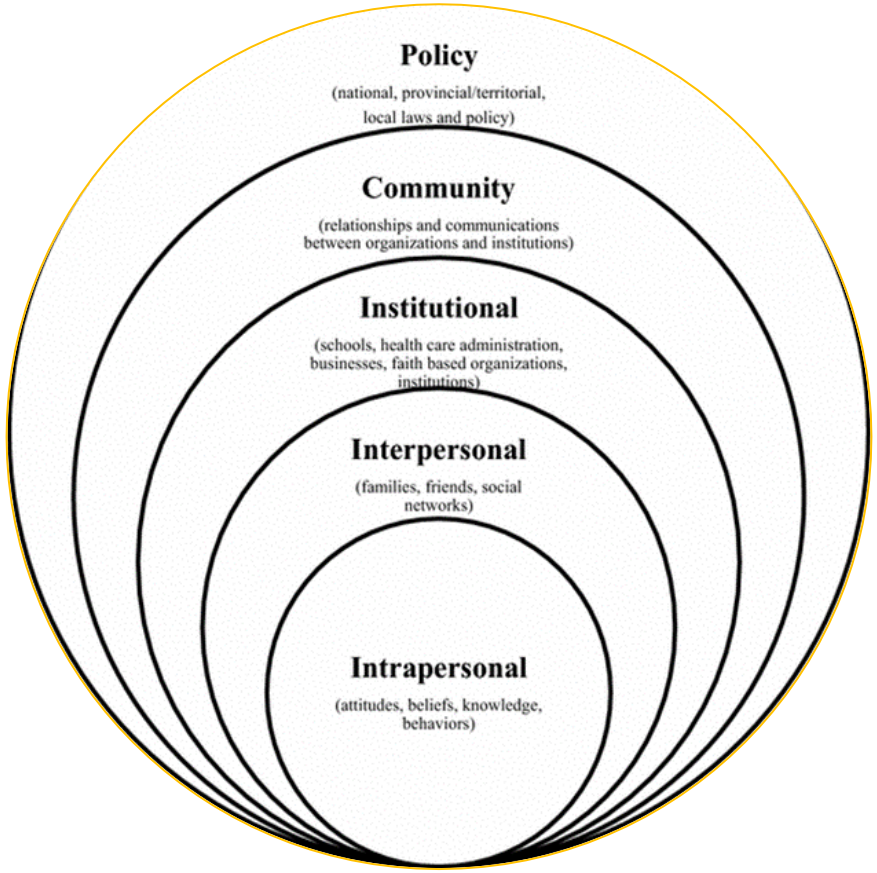
Root and proximal causes





The social ecology of loneliness

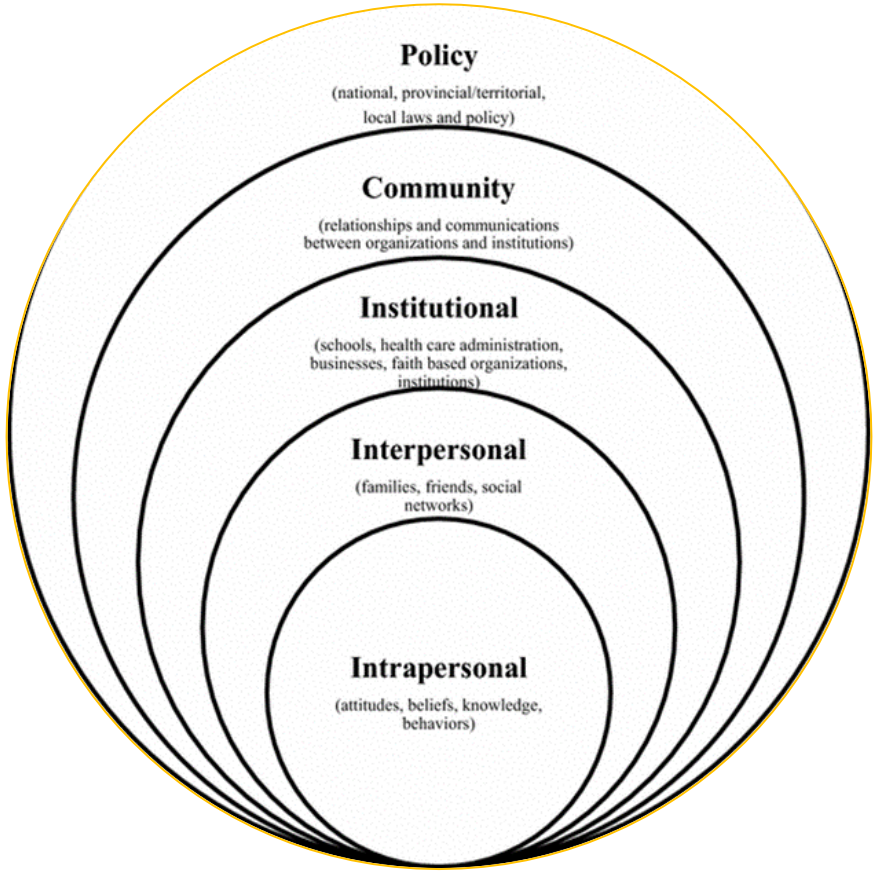




INDIVIDUAL LEVEL	
Drivers	Interventions
Mental health Physical health Social skills Emotional regulation	Therapies Social skills training

The social ecology of loneliness

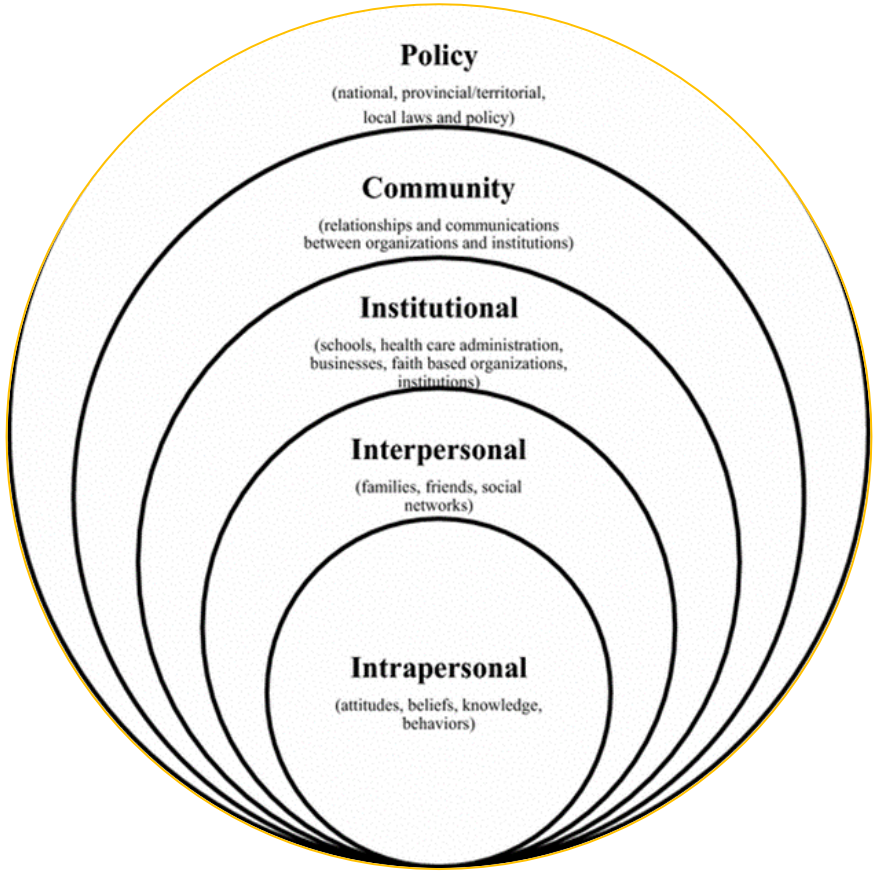




INTERPERSONAL LEVEL	
Drivers	Interventions
Isolation Low relationship quality Bullying	Befriending programmes Group activities Conflict resolution

The social ecology of loneliness

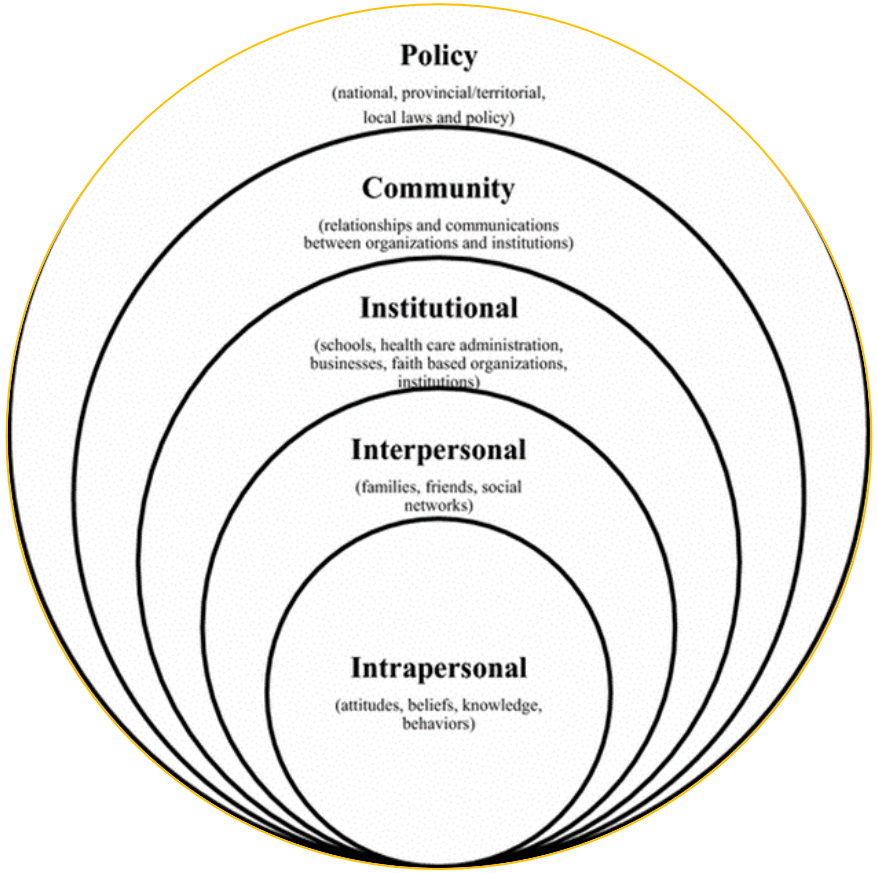




INSTITUTIONAL/COMMUNITY LEVEL	
Drivers	Interventions
Poor safety Poor urban planning Poor accessibility (incl transportation, cost, walkability, disableing access)	Better, more accessible, cheaper transport More, attractive and safe public spaces

The social ecology of loneliness





SOCIETAL/POLICY LEVEL	
Drivers	Interventions
Systemic injustices Cultural hegemony (norms) Economic insecurity Loneliness stigma	Inclusive policies and their implementation Financial supports More carefully developed public health messages

The example of gender

The example of gender

- Ample interest in whether men or women are more at risk…but disagreement on the answer

The Epidemic of Male Loneliness

It starts in childhood, and it's dangerous for everyone. What can we do? Plus: Which disinfectant wipes work & are safe for kids?

MELINDA WENNER MOYER
AUG 08, 2023 · PAID

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Women Feel More Lonely Than Men

In Articles, Culture, Family, Marriage, Social Issues by Kirk Giles / July 4, 2019

A study from Angus Reid *reveals a "portrait of social isolation and loneliness in Canada today." One portion of the study shows how women feel more lonely than men do. This study gives us a glimpse of how Canadians are doing in building a relationship with others.*



The example of gender

- Also in research: Men vs. Women
- Meta-analysis: 751 effect sizes!!!
- Close to zero overall effects (g = 0.07)
  - All effects were negligible
  - Huge variation across studies
  - Few explanations for this variation
  - (Except: it depends on the question)
  - **Is gender irrelevant then?**

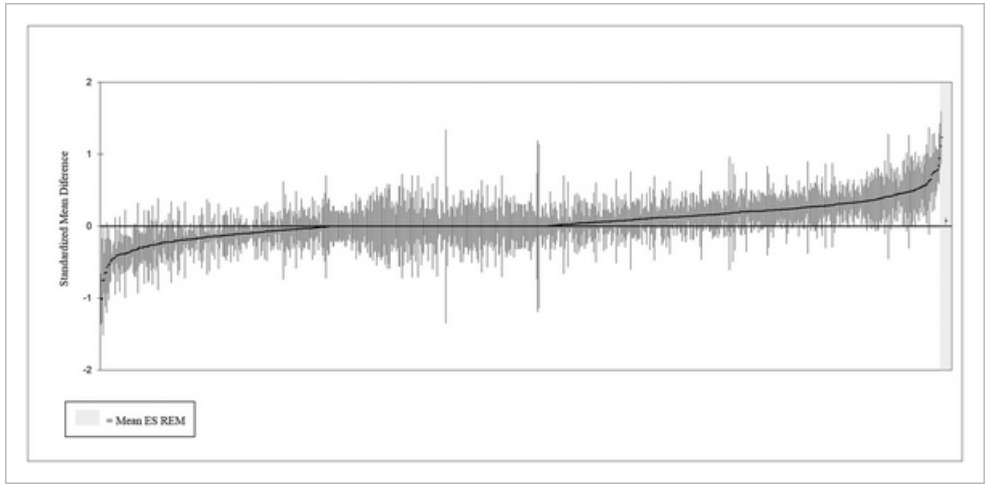
EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Personality

Empirical Paper | Full Access

Gender Differences in Loneliness Across the Lifespan: A Meta-Analysis

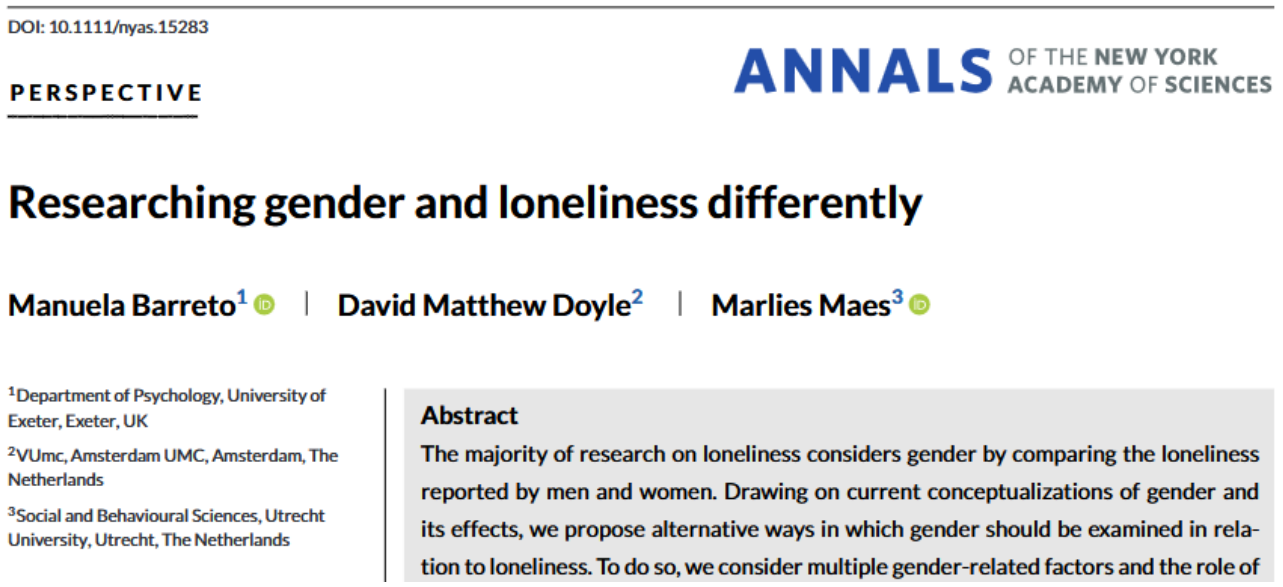
Marlies Maes, Pamela Qualter, Janne Vanhalst, Wim Van den Noortgate, Luc Goossens

First published: 13 November 2019 | https://doi-org.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/per.2220 |
Citations: 212



The example of gender

- Gendered does not mean different between men and women…
- The presence or absence of *overall* differences between groups is not very informative: We need to understand the gendered contexts and mechanisms that cause loneliness —and can be changed
- (Besides gender is more than men and women)



DOI: 10.1111/nyas.15283

PERSPECTIVE

ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Researching gender and loneliness differently

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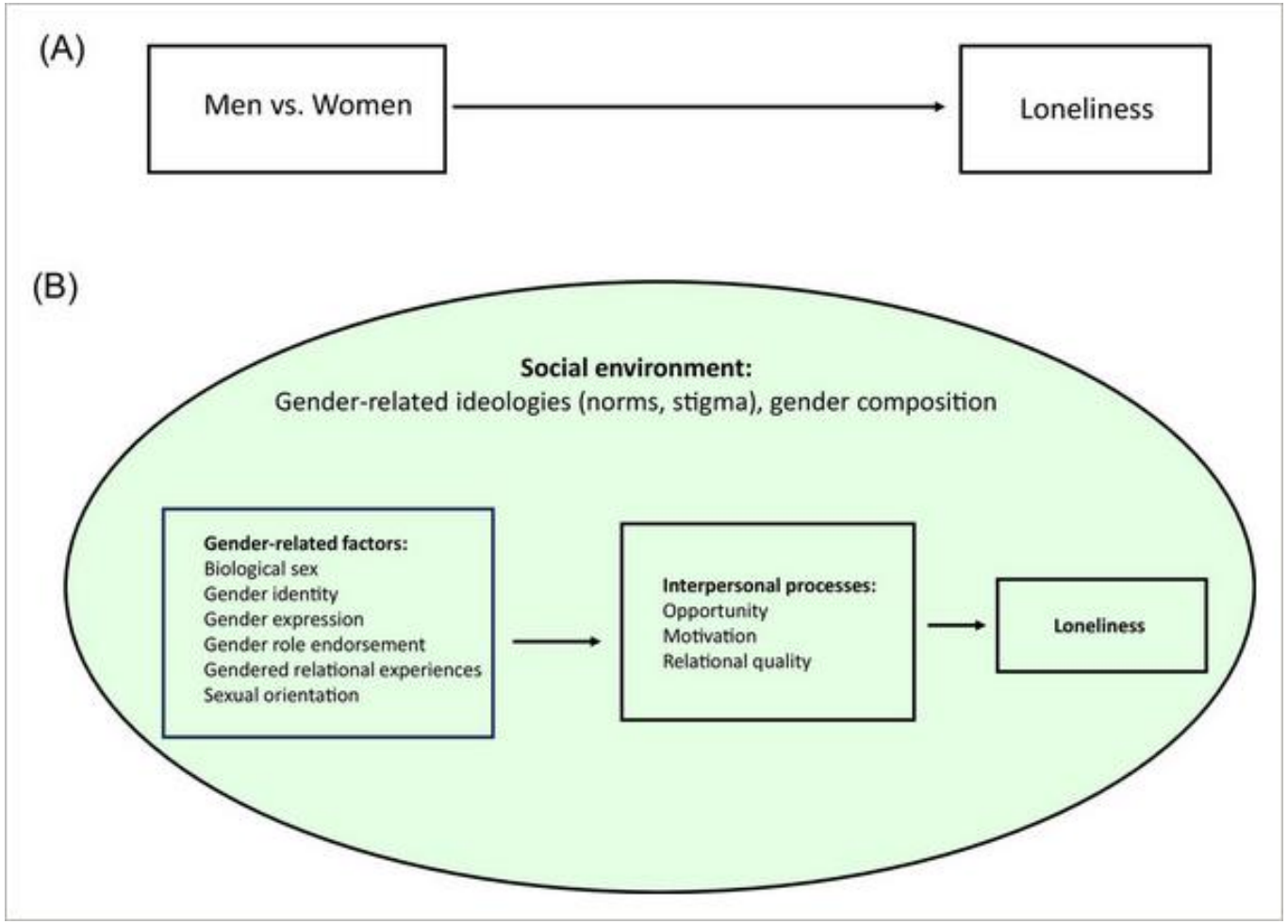
Abstract

The majority of research on loneliness considers gender by comparing the loneliness reported by men and women. Drawing on current conceptualizations of gender and its effects, we propose alternative ways in which gender should be examined in relation to loneliness. To do so, we consider multiple gender-related factors and the role of

Gendered loneliness

The importance of the social and physical environment

In shaping if and how gendered life experiences push people apart



Barreto et al. (2024)

Non-conformity to societal norms

- Conformity refers to the interaction between gender-related factors and relevant social norms
- Gendered societal expectations encompass:
  - Identifying with sex assigned at birth
  - Endorsing corresponding gender roles
  - Heterosexual relationships
  - Appropriate work-life balance
  - Producing offspring that are gender conforming
- Non-conformity =derogation and exclusion = loneliness



Gendered life experiences

- Violence, fear versus safety, e.g., street violence, rape
  - Root: norms of masculinity/femininity, unsafe spaces

- Reproductive health, e.g., infertility, abortion
  - Root: gender role expectations, lack of appropriate understanding and support /services

- Menstrual health, e.g., severe pain and bleeding
  - Medical misogyny (poor understanding and treatments), lack of effective support mechanisms

Conclusions

- Loneliness a product of community deficits that need to be better understood and addressed
- Need to go beyond superficial classifications of groups ‘at risk’ and recognise the **external** and **modifiable root** factors pushing them aside
- These operate at multiple levels, including schools, work organizations, neighbourhoods, states, among others: Social in all policies

Conclusions

- Assets and the politics of helping
  - Do not assume what is wrong and how to fix it
  - Involve community members in identifying their needs and solutions that work for them
  - But be aware that structural, institutionalised or systemic exclusion is not easily detected or described—which does not mean it is not key!

“The hypocrisy of governments that talk about loneliness while systematically destroying key sources of social connectedness is breathtaking”

Taylor (2020)



Thank you

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