



RUB

RUHR-UNIVERSITÄT BOCHUM

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHALLENGE OF LONELINESS

Maike Luhmann | Bilbao | June 21, 2024

A LONELINESS EPIDEMIC?

**Harvard Study: An
Epidemic of Loneliness Is
Spreading Across America**

**Canada's battle with the
loneliness epidemic**

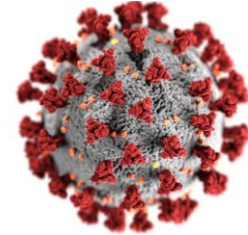
**Japan appoints Minister of Loneliness after
suicides claim more lives than COVID-19**

**'The loneliness epidemic has been in
Ireland long before Covid'**

**'Loneliness kills, and should be treated like a
disease in every respect'**

Government earmarks NIS 100 million to combat loneliness among elderly Israelis, 80% of whom live independently.

WHY NOW?

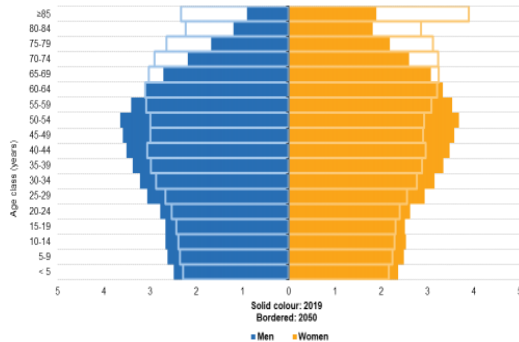


Aging societies

Technology

Mobility

Covid-19 pandemic

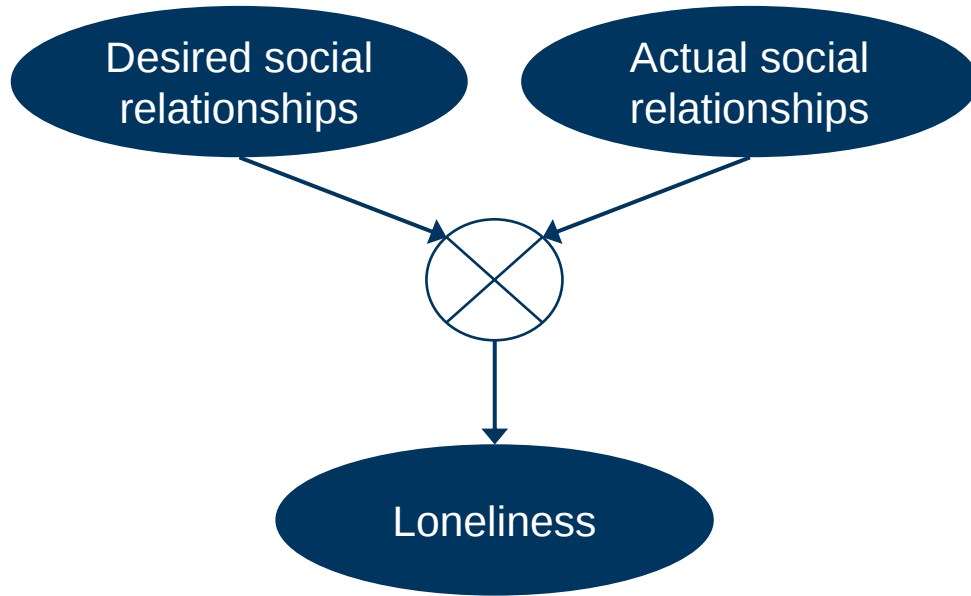


OUTLINE

1. **What is loneliness?**
2. **Loneliness as an individual problem**
3. **Loneliness in context**
4. **Loneliness across time**
5. **Loneliness across space**
6. **Conclusion**

What is Loneliness?

WHAT IS LONELINESS?



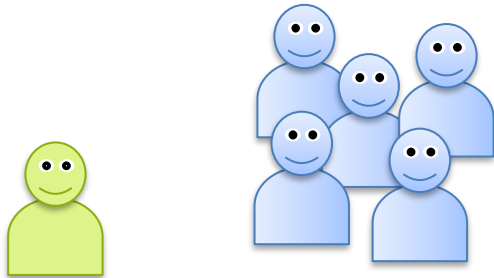
Key Points

- Subjective
- Quality > quantity
- Painful

WHAT LONELINESS IS NOT

Social Isolation

- Objective lack of social connections
- Not necessarily painful



Solitude

- Being alone voluntarily
- Pleasant



DIMENSIONS OF LONELINESS



Emotional Loneliness

Lack of intimate, trusting relationships



Social Loneliness

Lack of a sufficiently large circle of friends, social network



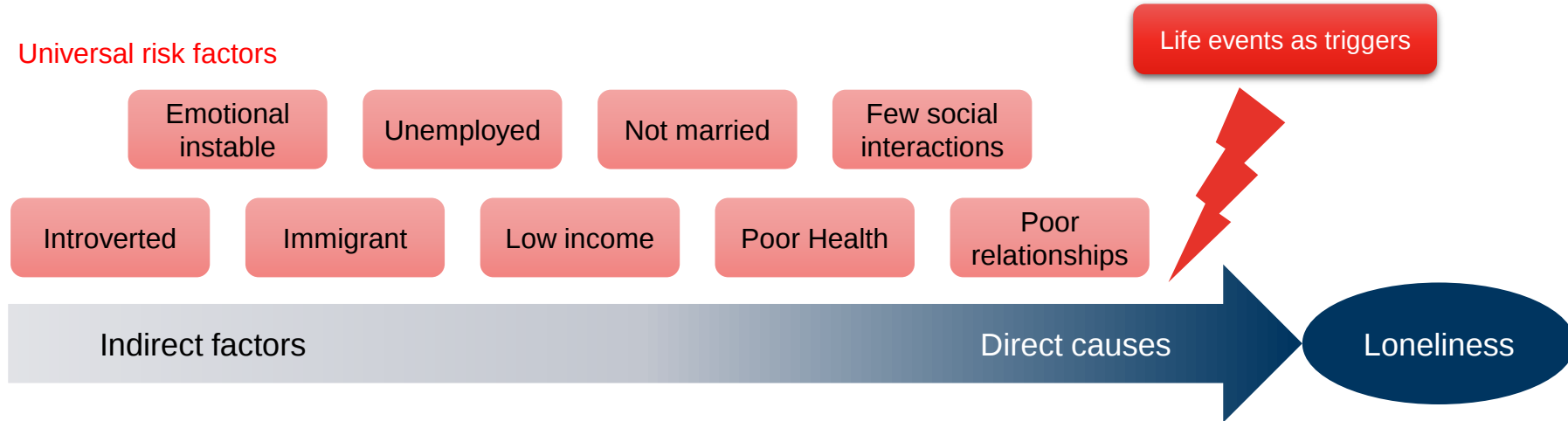
Collective Loneliness

Lack of a general sense of belonging, e.g. to community, society as a whole

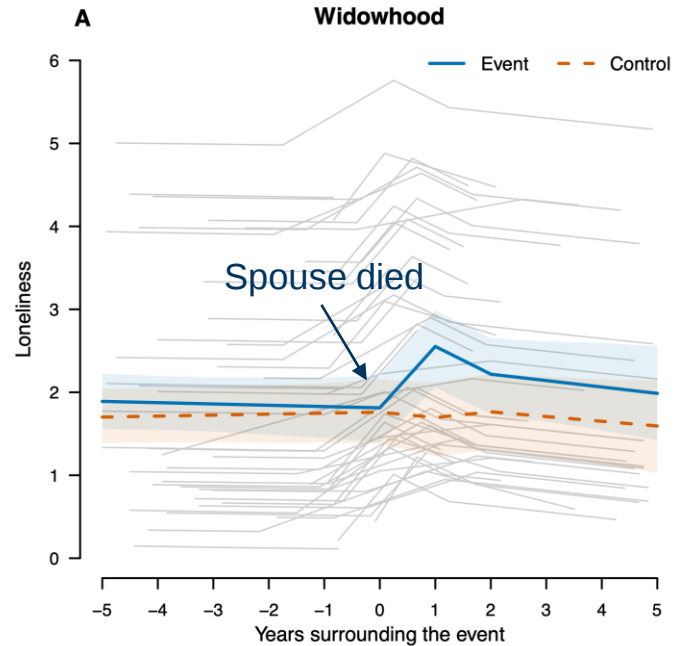
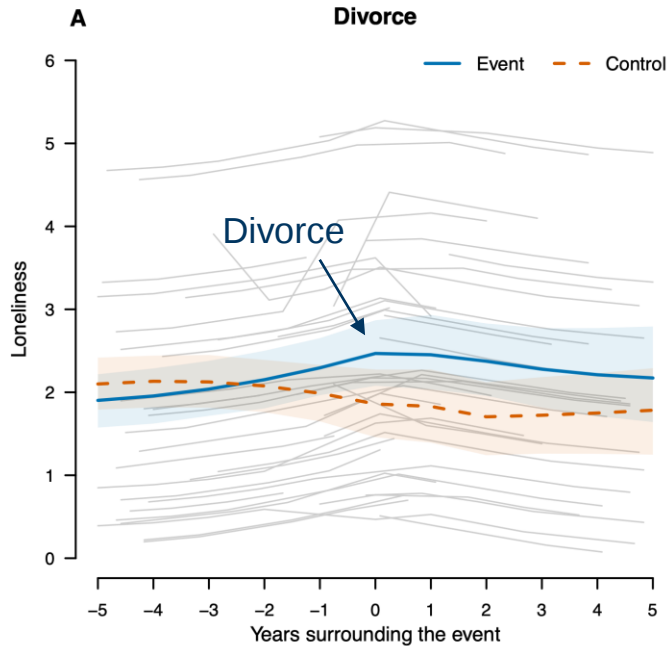
Loneliness as an Individual Problem

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RISK FACTORS

Universal risk factors



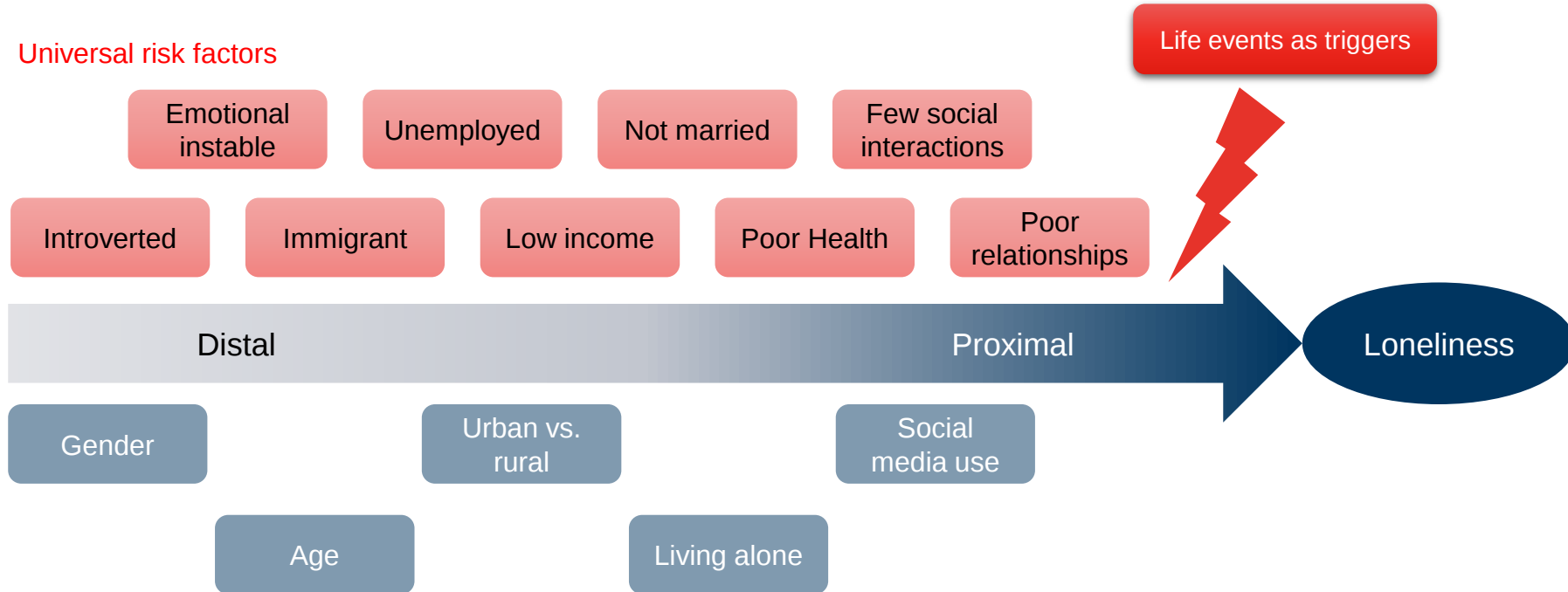
LIFE EVENTS



Buecker, Denissen & Luhmann (2021)

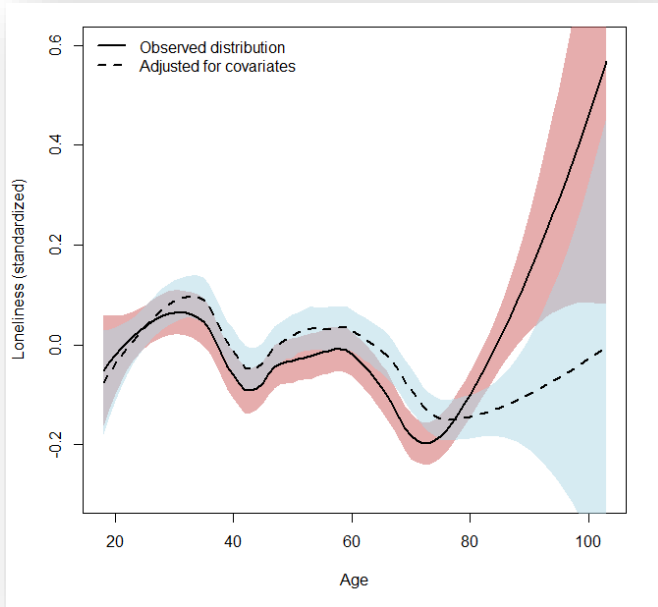
INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RISK FACTORS

Universal risk factors



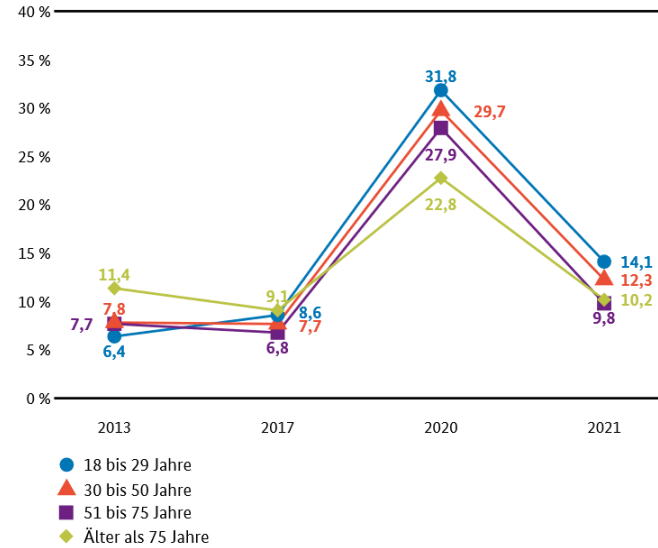
Group-specific risk factors

AGE DIFFERENCES



Socioeconomic Panel, Wave 2013, $N = 16,132$
Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016

Abbildung 2.3: Einsamkeitsbelastungen ab 2013 nach Altersgruppen, Bevölkerung ab 18 Jahren, Instrument: UCLA-LS

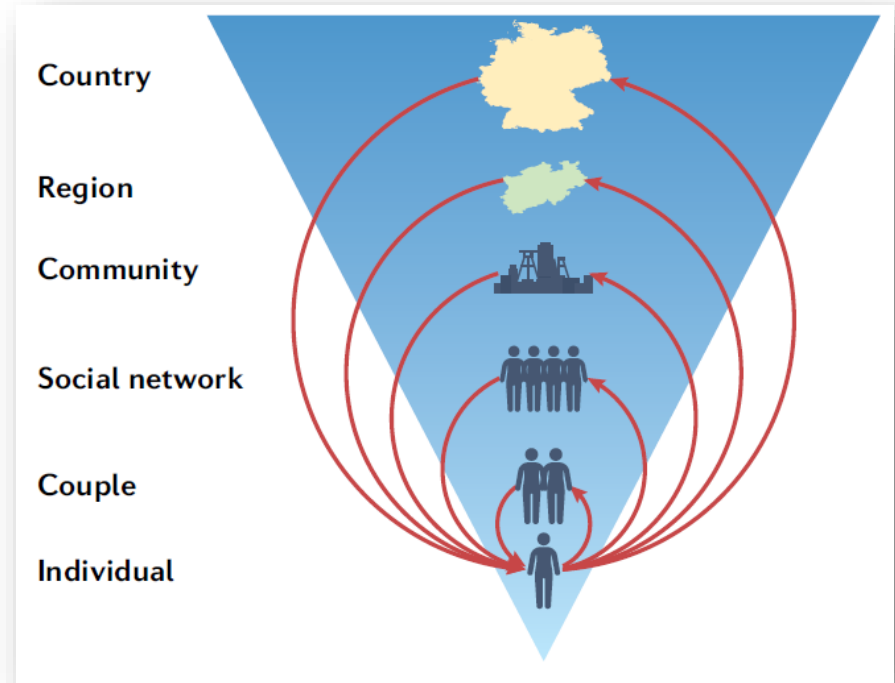


German Loneliness Barometer
 BMFSFJ, 2024

Loneliness in Context

WHAT ABOUT CONTEXT?

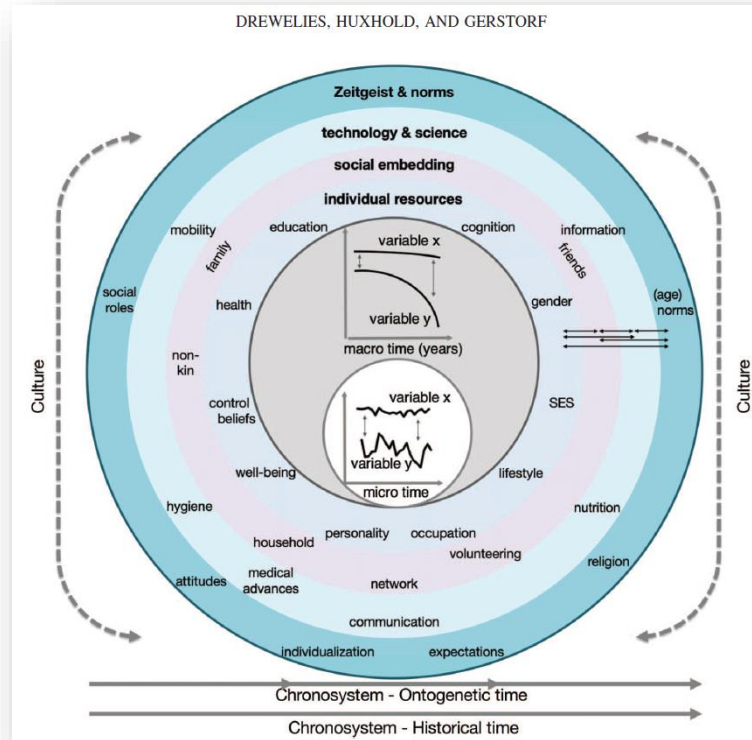
- How people think, feel and behave is shaped by the **greater context**
- Contexts vary across
 - **time** (sociocultural context)
 - **space** (geographical/cultural context)
- These contexts can be described and distinguished by **macro-level factors**, e.g.
 - Cultural norms and values
 - Societal welfare
 - Demographic composition



LONELINESS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

1. Does loneliness vary across time and space?
2. Why does loneliness vary across time and space?

THE HIDECO FRAMEWORK



- By Drewelies, Huxhold & Gerstorf (2019)
- **HIDECO** = Historical Changes in Developmental Contexts
- **Four major groups of macro-level factors**
 - Individual resources
 - Social embedding
 - Technology and science
 - Zeitgeist and norms
- Developed to explain **historical changes**, but might also be relevant to explain **geographical differences**

Loneliness Across Time

HOW TO STUDY HISTORICAL CHANGES

The perfect study

- Longitudinal, covering multiple decades
- Representative sample

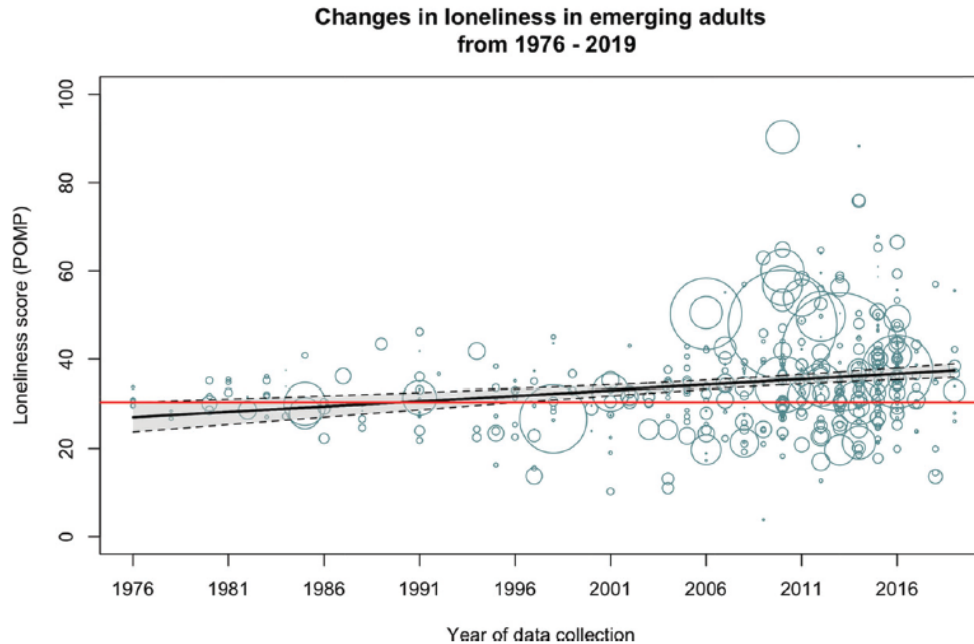
But ...

- For loneliness: only available since ~2008 (e.g., LISS, GSS, SOEP)

The second-best study

- Cross-temporal meta-analysis
- Correlate average loneliness scores reported in single studies with year of data collection

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN LONELINESS



Buecker et al. (2021)

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN LONELINESS

Table 2 | Summary of cross-temporal meta-analyses on historical changes in loneliness levels

Study	Age group	Country	Loneliness measure	Time period	Loneliness trend	Effect size for mean-level change across the entire time period
Buecker et al. (2021) ⁵⁴	Emerging adults (18–29 years old)	Studies from all continents, but mostly from the USA	Different versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale ^{163,164}	1976–2019	Significant increase in loneliness only in North American samples, not in European or Asian samples (possibly owing to lack of statistical power). No significant differences in historical changes in loneliness between North American and European and Asian samples. Values have been relatively stable since 2012.	$d=0.56$
Clark et al. (2015) ⁵²	High-school students (Study 1)	USA	Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale ¹⁶⁴	1978–2009	Loneliness declined	$d=-0.26$
	College students (Study 2)	USA	Six items with five response options	1991–2012	Loneliness declined	$d=-0.11$
Xin & Xin (2016) ⁵³	College students	China	Chinese version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) ^{163,165}	2002–2011	Loneliness increased	$d=0.39$
Yan et al. (2014) ⁵⁵	>60 years old	China	Chinese version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) ^{163,165}	1995–2011	Loneliness increased	$d=1.02$

RELEVANT MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS

Values and norms

- Individualism?
- Materialism?
- Political values?

Family and social lives

- Fewer people get married
- But social norms regarding marriage and family change as well

RELEVANT MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS

Technology and mobility

- Digitalization and smartphones?
- Residential mobility

Individual resources and living conditions

- Economic growth?
- Demographic changes?

Loneliness Across Space

HOW TO STUDY NATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The perfect study

- Nationally representative samples from multiple countries
- Same (measurement-invariant) measure of loneliness

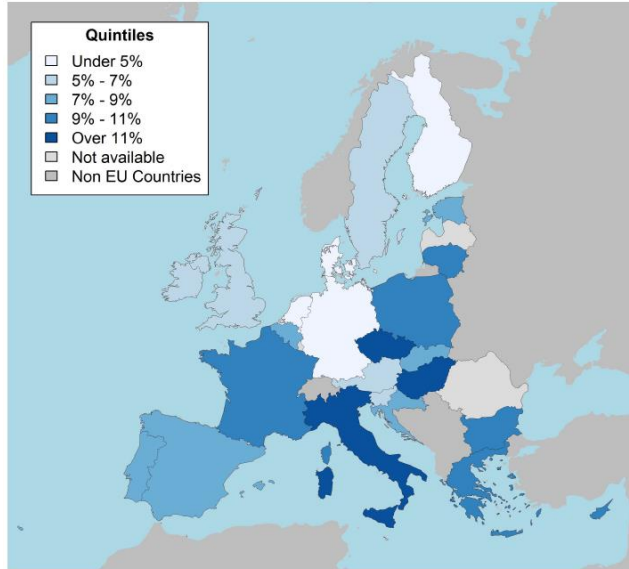
But ...

- Most available studies focused on Europe and on specific age groups

The second-best study

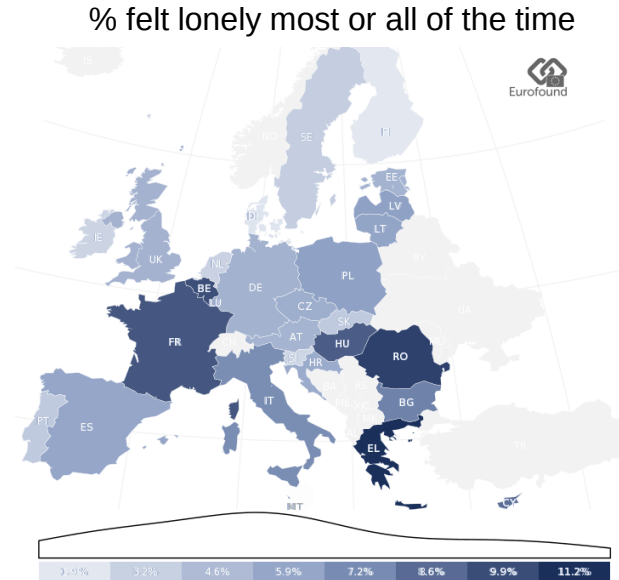
- Meta-analysis

LONELINESS LEVELS IN THE EU (2010-2016)



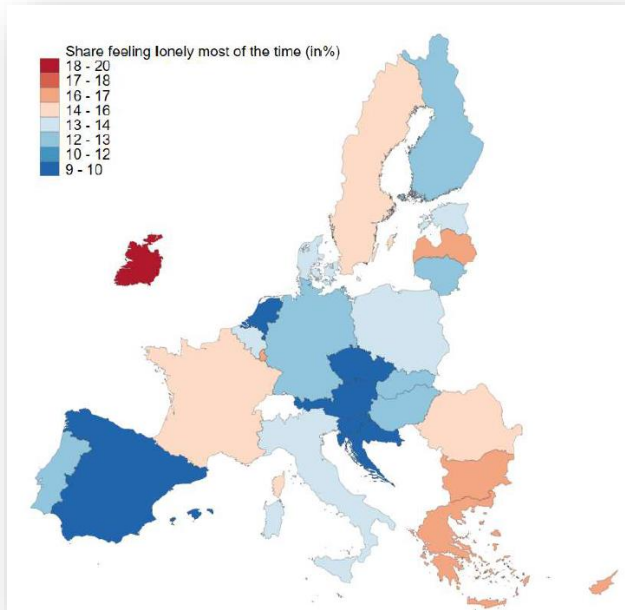
Note 1: European Social Survey (2010, 2012 and 2014).

European Union, 2018

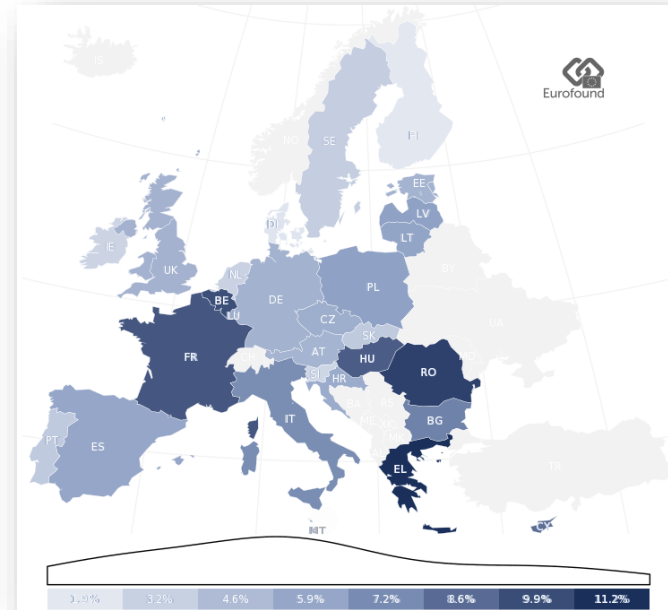


European Quality of Life Survey (2016)

LONELINESS LEVELS IN THE EU (2022)

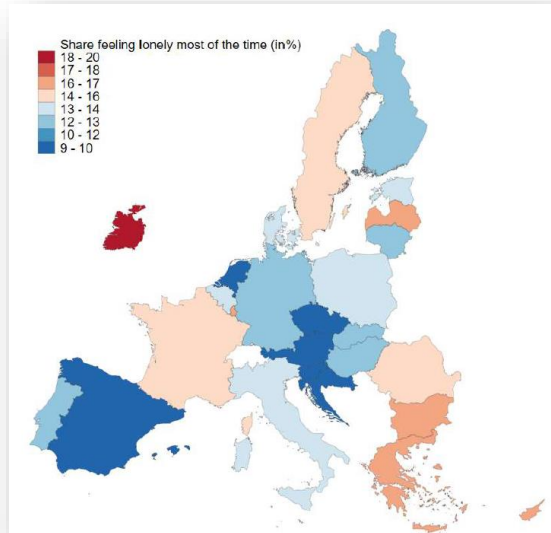


EU Loneliness Survey 2022



European Quality of Life Survey (2016)

EXPLAINING NATIONAL LONELINESS LEVELS



Factors associated with higher loneliness

Prevalence of individual risk factors at the national level

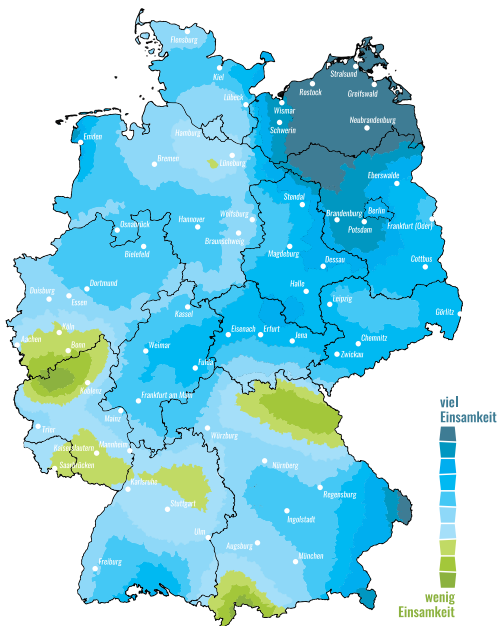
(Fokkema et al., 2012)

- Demographic composition (e.g. average age)
- Socioeconomic indicators (e.g. GDP, poverty rates)
- Health (e.g. public health expenditures)

Cultural norms: Higher levels of loneliness in collectivistic than in individualistic countries

(Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014)

WITHIN-COUNTRY DIFFERENCES



- No systematic differences between **rural** and **urban** areas
- Factors associated with higher regional loneliness:
 - More population change
 - Objective regional remoteness
 - Greater distance to public parks and sport/leisure facilities
 - Worse perceived neighborhood relations

Socioeconomic Panel, Wave 2013, $N = 17,602$

Buecker, Ebert, Götz, Entringer & Luhmann, 2020

Conclusion

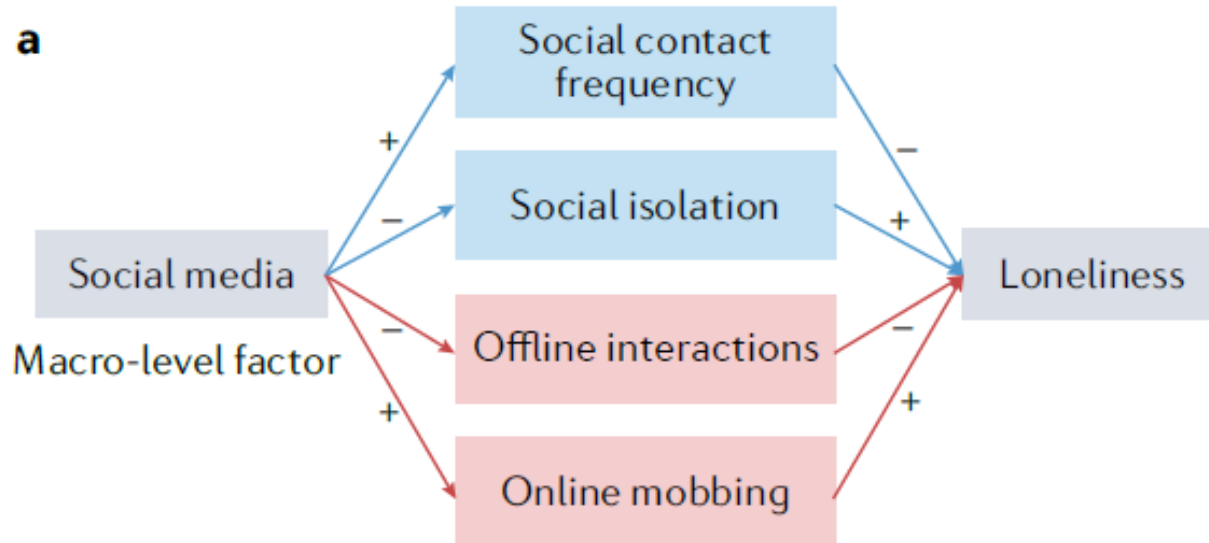
LONELINESS ACROSS TIME

- Before Covid 19: No clear evidence for a global loneliness epidemic
- After Covid 19: Loneliness appears to be on the rise
 - Some groups and some countries more affected than others
- Macro-level factors might contribute to historical changes in loneliness
 - Theoretically plausible associations
 - But probably complex, indirect, delayed effects
 - Lack of studies investigating these effects

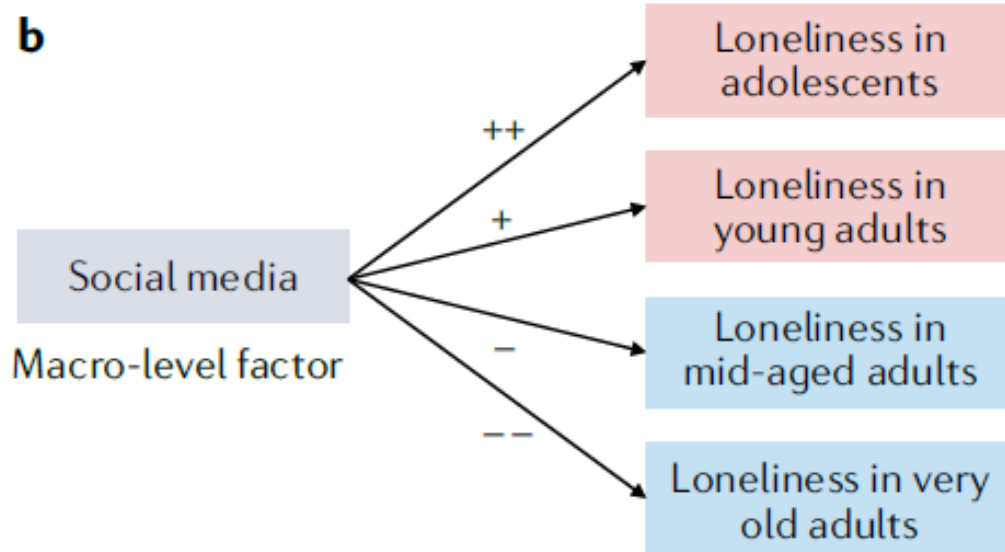
LONELINESS ACROSS SPACE

- Clear evidence for geographical differences in loneliness
 - Between countries
 - Within countries
- Relevant macro-level factors
 - Cultural norms and values
 - Demographic composition
 - Socioeconomic factors
 - Physical environment

IT'S COMPLICATED (1)

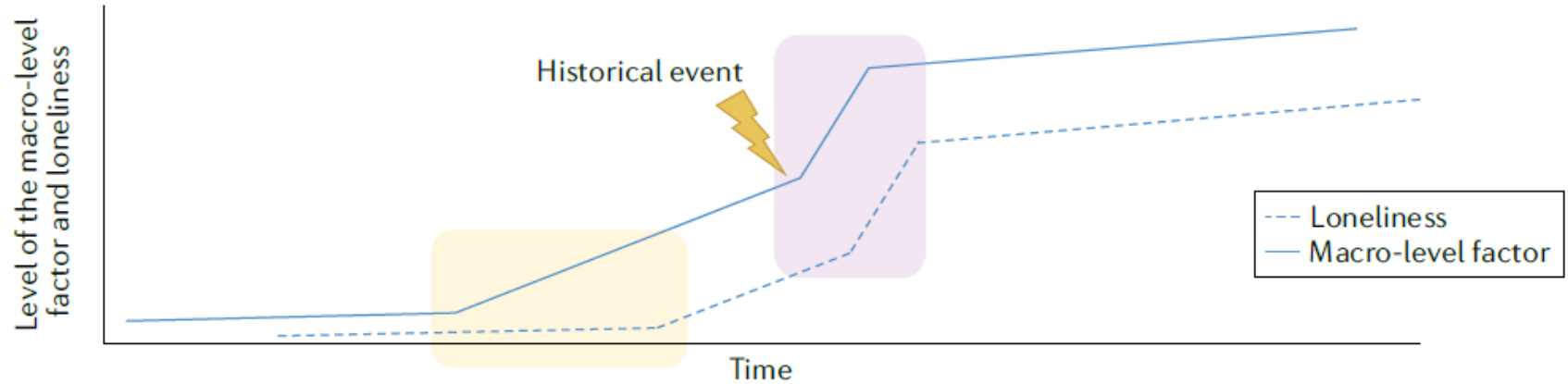


IT'S COMPLICATED (2)



IT'S COMPLICATED (3)

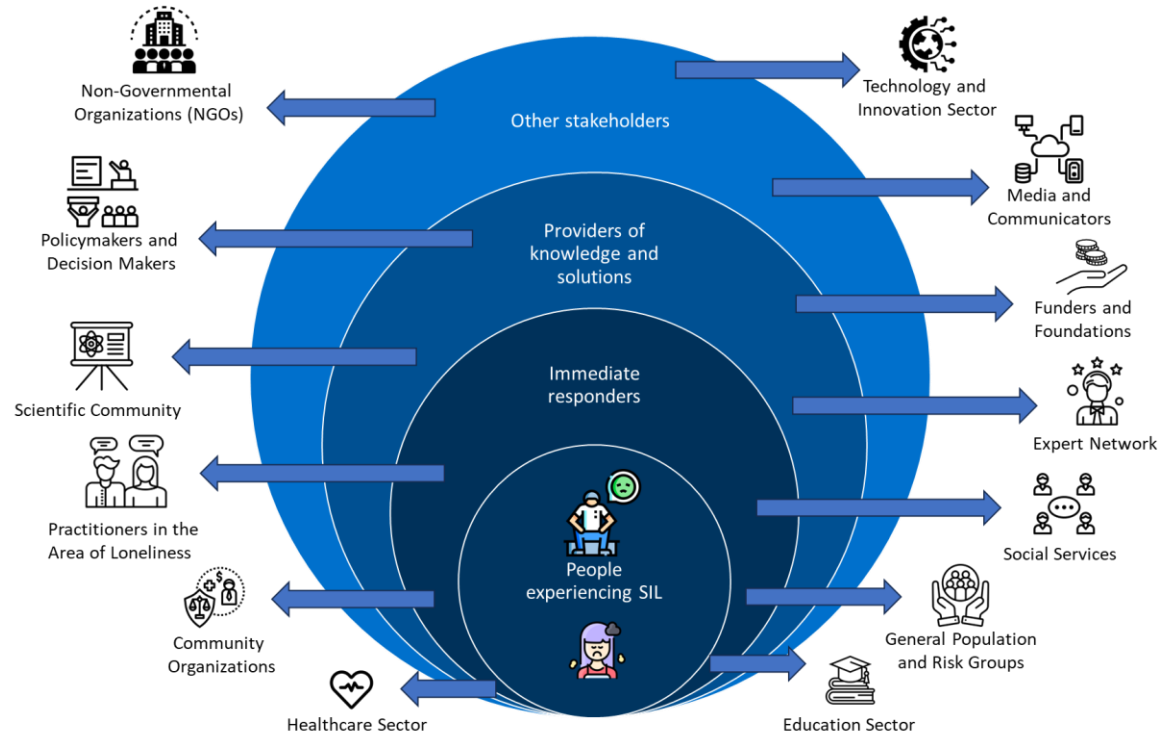
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A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHALLENGE

- Loneliness comes in different shapes
- Loneliness is influenced by multiple factors at different levels
- Requires a multidimensional solution that integrates
 - Individual-focused interventions
 - Structural changes

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHALLENGE



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!



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