Isolation or Independence? Investigating Older Adults' Loneliness in Italy

Annalisa Donno, Maria Letizia Tanturri

University of Padova

Introduction and background

As the global population continues to age at an unprecedented rate, with older adults representing a growing proportion of society, it becomes more and more important to understand the complexity of emotional and social experiences characterizing this life stage in order to understand how to ensure wellbeing of an increasing population group.

Particular interest has been devoted during the last decades to the concept of loneliness and the consequences it has on several outcomes in old age such as wellbeing, quality of life, health, increased risk of depression, cognitive decline (Luo et al., 2012; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

The aging process is marked by significant life transitions, which may result both in opportunities as well as in challenges for old people social interactions. As people age, they may experience significant changes both in social networks and companionship schemes, through several mechanisms.

Older individuals may experience changes in their social roles and responsibilities. For instance, retirement or children leaving home can lead to a significant change in their daily routines and social interactions. Even if releasing old people from many of the obligatory demands of work and family (Rosow, 1976) and giving them greater discretion over their use of time (perhaps more than that at any other point in their adult lives) such changes can leave individuals feeling a loss of purpose and social connections, potentially contributing to loneliness related feelings (Victor C. R., Scambler S. J., Bond J. & Bowling A., 2000; Victor C. R. & Bowling A., 2012; Wang M., 2007).

Moreover, the loss of friends and family members due to death or relocation, can lead to reduced opportunities for social interaction, as well as for companionship and emotional support, making older individuals feel isolated and lonely (Victor C. R. & Yang K., 2012; Cacioppo J. T. & Patrick W., 2008): reduced social network size and composition are likely to affect an individual's experience of loneliness.

Aging often brings physical and mobility limitations, and increased risk of chronic health conditions. As older adults become less mobile and independent, they may find it challenging to engage in social activities, visit friends and family, or participate in community events. These limitations can result in increased social withdrawal and loneliness (Cornwell E. Y. & Waite L. J., 2009).

Contextual and cultural element can also influence the perception of loneliness among old people: living in age-friendly environments guarantying the necessary infrastructure and services for living fulfilling and independent lives, and the development of policies and programs aimed at addressing the unique needs and challenges of aging populations, can help overcoming loneliness and isolation feelings.

In addition, coping mechanisms for loneliness can be put in act by individuals who may carry out specific activities as indirect means to alleviate the emotional distress of loneliness and provide a sense of satisfaction and connection.

In summary, aging can generate a sense of loneliness due to a combination of factors, including changes in social networks, health issues, losses of loved ones, and shifts in social roles.

Understanding determinants responsible of such a negative feeling is essential for addressing the loneliness experienced by older adults and promoting their overall well-being.

Research questions

Loneliness is a subjective, negative emotional state that arises when a person perceives a discrepancy between their desired and actual level of social connection or companionship. It is the feeling of being disconnected, isolated, or lacking meaningful social interaction. It typically occurs when a person desires more social contact or deeper social connections but is unable to fulfil these desires.

The multifaceted nature of such a concept require several elements to be considered, in a comprehensive approach, to delve into the determinants of loneliness and to gain a deeper understanding of its complexities in old age.

Existing research has provided valuable insights into the determinants of loneliness; however, empirical studies often take into account only single aspects of this complex phenomenon.

In this work we seek to integrate multiple aspects and potential determinants of loneliness, exploring their combined impact on loneliness.

The emotional experience of loneliness often depends on an individual's perception of their social relationships, their ability to meet their social needs, and the quantity and quality of their interactions. Loneliness can be influenced by both objective factors and subjective factors.

By using time use data we provide a holistic view of individual's daily life. Time use data will allow us to focus on:

- *De facto solitude* which we define as the condition of being physically alone. We measure the amount of time individual spend alone in a sample day, thus relying on an objective measure of physical isolation (being alone or lacking the presence of others). Loneliness is a subjective experience, and different individuals may respond to solitude differently. Empirical evidence indicates that other people are fundamental to older adults but that they may not be important as daily and hourly companions.

Do the quantity of time spent alone (or the time spent with other people, and thus the quantity of interactions with others - the other side of the coin) plays a role in determining feelings of loneliness?

- *Potential/perceived social connectedness* defined as an individual's availability of social interactions and support. Beyond objective measures, one's own expectations and feelings of social connectedness may play vital role in shaping loneliness. The hypothesis is that loneliness can persist even when surrounded by others if an individual perceives a lack of meaningful or accessible social connections.

Do the experience of loneliness at old age depends on objective solitude or on individual's perception of their social relationships and social support, and the quality of their interactions?

- *The role of activities*. The types of activities older adults engage in are likely to have an impact on loneliness, not only because some activities (social activities, volunteering, active entertainment) have – by definition – a certain intrinsic level of social engagement, but also because they may help people not to perceive the negative feeling of loneliness allowing for new forms of satisfactions through the development of purposeful tasks. Some individuals may use specific activities as coping mechanisms for loneliness and to alleviate the emotional distress of loneliness and provide a sense of connection, even if it is through indirect means. On the other side, old age limitations could prevent people performing some desired activities, thus exacerbating loneliness feelings.

Do activities alleviate or exacerbate loneliness? Which activities are meaningful for loneliness? Are there specific activities or situations where time spent alone is more strongly correlated with loneliness?

Data and methods

We use Italian Time Use survey data collected in 2013-14 and focus on a subsample of 18,575 individuals aged 55 years old and more.

Time use diaries provides information on how individuals structure their daily routines, including details on how they allocate their time in different activities over the course of a 24 hours day, divided into 10 minutes intervals. For each activity, respondents provide details on the location, and – most important for this study – on the co-presence of other individuals. Respondents record the people they are with during each activity, by specifying the relationship with the individuals present during an activity (this can include co-living family members - parent, children, spouse; not co-living family members; other not co-living people - friends, colleagues, acquaintances), thus giving insights on the social context in which each activity is taking place.

Such information allows to measure the *de facto solitude*/companionship. Specifically, we compute the amount of (awake) time old people spend alone, the amount of (awake) time they spend with co-living people, and (awake) time spent with other not co-living individuals.

Moreover, by simultaneously considering both the time dedicated to different activities and companionship, we are able to distinguishing between time spent alone or with other people when performing each activity, thus understanding which activities foster/hinder loneliness, and if performing them alone or not make some differences in individuals' emotional experience.

In addition, an individual questionnaire collects a series of socio-demographic characteristics, including information on the availability of help and support, the frequency of contacts with friends, which can be considered as measures of the potential *social connectedness* of old people.

The individuals' geographic area of residence and the size (number of inhabitants) of the place they live in will be considered as proxy measures of cultural/contextual factors (in terms of opportunities for social interactions and support) which could explain loneliness feeling among old people.

We measure loneliness by using answers to a question asking whether individuals wish for more time in the company of others or not. The idea is that asking if individuals need more social interaction, means to tap into their subjective experience of loneliness. It allows to understand whether they perceive a gap between their desired and actual social connectedness. Older adults who express the desire for more social interaction are signalling an unmet need for companionship. They may be therefore experiencing a sense of isolation or a lack of meaningful relationship. This question helps identifying those who are at risk of loneliness or already experiencing it, even if they are not physically alone all the time.

We run logistic regression analyses to model the probability of declaring to feel the need of spending more time with other people, controlling for a series of individual characteristics (age, household size, education, professional status).

Results

First results (Table 1) show that *de facto solitude* (time spent alone) is not significantly associated to loneliness, and that living alone do not increase the risk for loneliness, too. This is probably due to the fact that older adults have reached a stage in life where they are able to adjust to changing social circumstances (e.g. retirement or widowhood) and to adopt coping mechanisms for dealing with solitude. Moreover, they may prioritize the quality of social interactions over the quantity, thus

having smaller but close-knit social network that provides them with meaningful companionship and emotional support.

Table 1. Logistic regression results

	Odds ratios	
Intercept	0,827	*
Hours alone	0,999	
Hours with others - not co-living	0,990	.
Hours with others - co-living	0,999	
Household size (Ref. 2)		
1	0,978	
>2	0,975	
Number available contacts for support	0,9566	**
Frequency meeting friends (Ref. More than once a week)		
Never	1,270	***
Don't have friends	1,371	**
Some times a month	0,951	
Some times a year	1,0544	
Every day	1,061	
Once a week	0,853	***
City of residence size (Ref. Metropolitan area)		
<10000 inabithants	1,098	*
>10000 inabithants	1,082	.
Geographic area (Ref. North-Ovest)		
Center	0,968	
Isles	0,724	***
Noth-East	1,145	**
South	0,743	***

Controlling for age, sex, professional position, education

De facto companionship significantly lowers the risk of loneliness, but this result holds only for the time spent with not co-living people, probably because such kind of social interaction with non-family members are more meaningful for older adults.

Potential social connectedness measures are significant factors in explaining loneliness; specifically, the higher the number of people older adults can rely on for support, if needed, the lower the risk to feel lonely. Having no friends or never seeing them is detrimental for loneliness. Perceived social integration and support play a fundamental role in describing loneliness-generating mechanisms at old age.

Living in the South of the country (including Isles) is a loneliness mitigating factor, on the contrary, living in the north-east of Italy increases the risk for loneliness. Probably the cultural norms characterized by a strong tradition of close-knit families and tight community bonds can provide older adults with a built-in social support system and companionship, protecting from loneliness.

As far as activities are concerned they are not significantly associated to loneliness risk.