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Belongingness and Loneliness: Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives

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Background

Social determinants of health are of growing interest to researchers (1,2)

Increasingly, social determinants are an acknowledged **public health concern**:

Loneliness identified by the Institute of Public Health (3)

Social exclusion identified as a risk factor north & south of the border (4)

Social activity engagement predictive of cognitive function in Irish older adults (5)



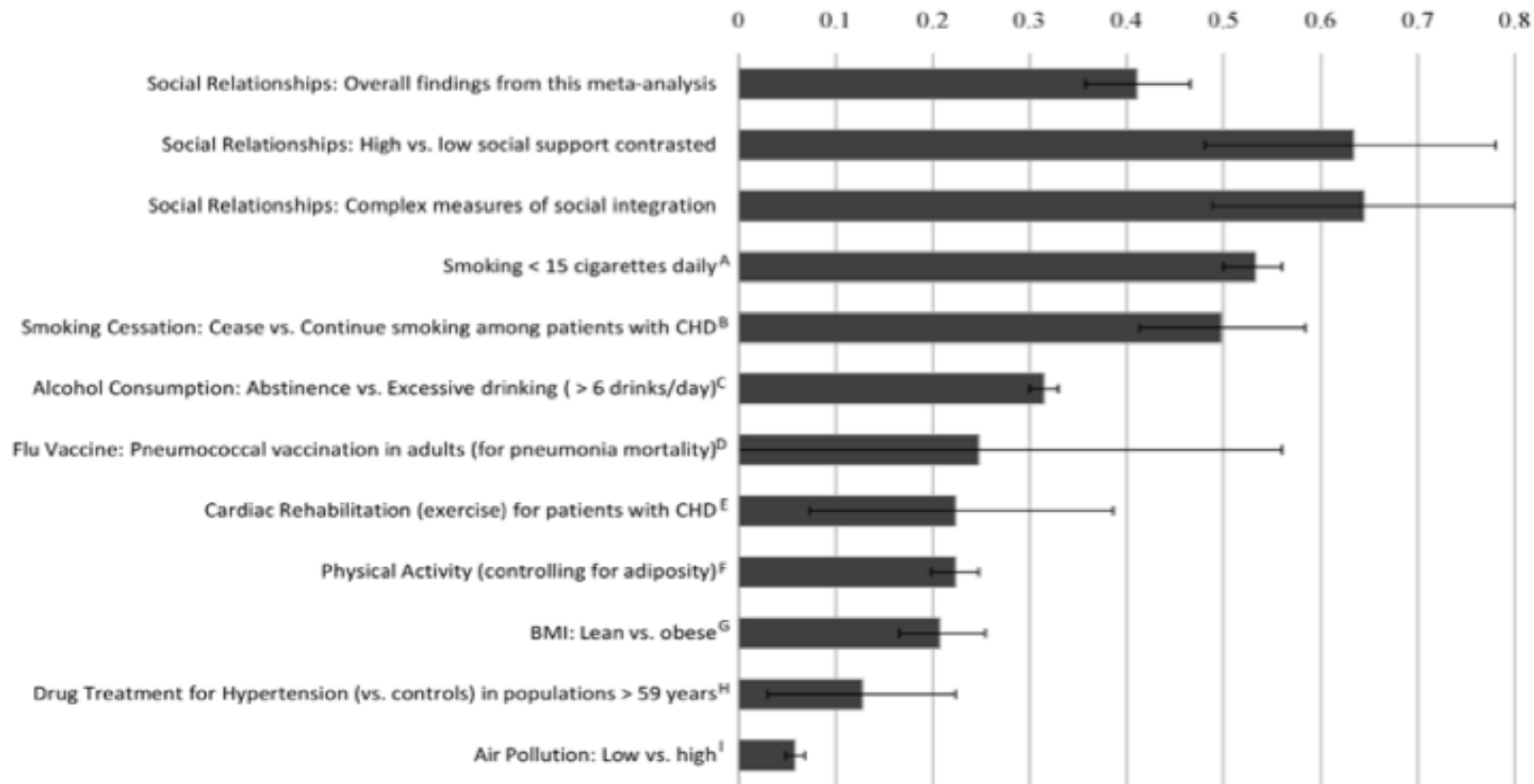


Figure 1. Results from a meta-analysis performed by Holt-Lunstad (6), clearly indicating the impact of social relationships on mortality risk relative to other well-known risk factors.

Background

Complex social concepts are often introduced to health research without a consensus on their meaning

E.g. social processes often considered to have a homogenous effect on health, but may in fact impact health in different ways (7) .

Consensus and **shared understanding** is vital to the measurement of social phenomena and their concomitant treatment & interventions in order to optimise health outcomes



Social Concepts Lacking Clar

Loneliness has many different published definitions:

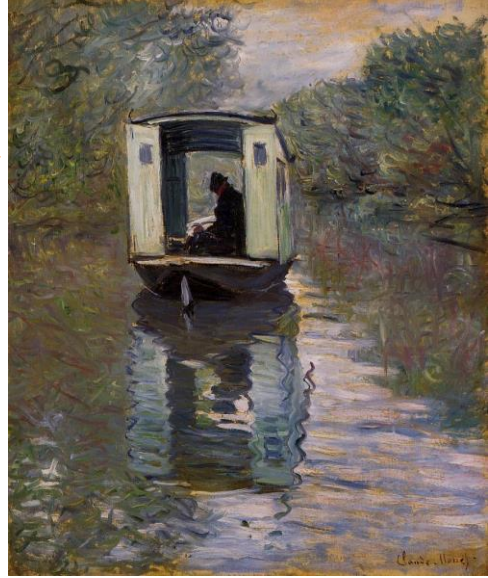
A Personality Trait (8)

Perceived Social Isolation (9,10)

Psychological Process (11)

Evolutionary adaptive response (12)

A Genotype (13)



The Meaning of Loneliness



Loneliness has many different meanings to older adults themselves (14): qualitative findings of the **COASTAL study** showed that older adults equated loneliness with:

Security

Boredom

Living arrangements

Lack of religiosity



Why is Conceptual Clarity Important?

Loneliness has been linked to many deleterious outcomes including:

Dementia (15)

Depressive symptoms (16)

Poor sleep (17)

Early mortality (18)

Even after controlling for biological risk factors

Why is Conceptual Clarity Important?

Loneliness has historically been very difficult to intervene upon (19)

Most interventions focus on social connectedness or support, which are not the same as loneliness

Conceptually clarifying loneliness will help public health researchers to identify **potential points of intervention** for ageing populations

One way to clarify loneliness may be to consider states which are opposite to it - which may include **belongingness**



Belongingness

Baumeister and Leary: “the **belongingness hypothesis** is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”. (p. 497; 20)

Belonging, understood broadly as the **desire for social bonds and connections to others**, has a long history of inquiry in many disciplines. It is clear that a sense of belonging is linked to personal well-being, physical health, feelings of safety and security, along with familial, social and political inclusion.

Failures of belonging are linked to negative health outcomes and it has been recently taken up as a factor when considering the social determinants of health.



Belonging as a multi-faceted, complex experience and concept

1. **'Belonging to the world'** (see: 21,22) or primary belonging – an experience of feeling embedded and at ease in the world without the experience of alienation or unreality.
2. **Interpersonal belonging** – an experience of having the capacity for ease and connection in personal face-to-face relationships.
3. **Social belonging** – an experience of group or social membership and the experience of participation in a 'we', whether material or virtual.
4. **Historical belonging** – an experience of belonging to a shared tradition, ancestry or history.
5. **Political belonging** – an experience of identity and inclusion through membership to a nation state or other 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006).
6. **Environmental belonging** (see: 23, 24) – a sense of feeling 'at home' or 'at ease' within a particular place or geographical location, landscape or setting.

Lack of Belongingness & Associated Health Outcomes



HIV medication adherence, overall functioning & quality of life among individuals living with HIV (25)

Severity of depression among individuals with history of depression (26)

Suicidal ideation among older adults (27)

Reasons to live among older adults (28)

Mental health among transgender individuals (29)

Conceptual Clarity of Belongingness

While *'belonging is the focus of much research, few authors actually discuss at length what they mean by the concept'* (May, 2013, p. 78; 30). —

Regularly conflated with group membership, identity, citizenship, kinship, cultural integration, emotional attachment, social integration, connectedness... (31)

In health literature, belongingness is conflated with: community membership, connectedness, social capital, and social support, along with social integration, social cohesion and group identification (32).

Our Proposed Research

Collaborative exploration of the concepts of **belongingness** and **loneliness** using:

Qualitative Data Collection - **The Phenomenological interview**

Participants of diverse backgrounds

Building on our previous research (14) which attempted to clarify the concept of loneliness.

Expected Outcomes

A phenomenology of belongingness

Further understanding of the experience of the various aspects of belonging (e.g., community, place, temporal, political, etc.).

Transdisciplinary understanding of the role of belongingness in health and well-being and how belonging might be a conceptual category that could be of use diagnostically and to practitioners when thinking about patient experience.

Implications for Public Health Researchers & Policy Makers

By crystallising our understanding of belongingness, our research will also inform public health on the value of intervening when belongingness is not felt

Our proposed research will enable us to develop a scale of belongingness and as such quantify its role in determining health outcomes

Public health researchers in all spheres should consider the conceptual clarity of the phenomena they measure & intervene upon, particularly in the social domain, due to the known problems of definition here

Thank you!

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