Social Isolation and Loneliness Comparative Perspectives

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Background

As populations in many countries experience demographic shifts towards aging, it is important to recognize the implications of such transitions on disaster planning, such as the increased number of adults over the age of 65 living alone. The longitudinal Health and Retirement Study from the United States started in 1992 as well as its counterparts in other countries such as ELSA for England, KLoSA for South Korea, and JSTAR for Japan have been surveying older. Better understanding how the instruments used vary can give some clues as to how certain social issues with disaster planning consequences for older adults are viewed across different countries.

Social isolation and loneliness can broadly be defined as limited to no contact with other individuals versus a subjective feeling that emotional needs are not being met by social contact, which makes them different though often coinciding with one another. On a societal level, there are implications for disaster planning as older adults experiencing either may have substantial difficulty evacuating prior to, enduring, or recovering from a disaster.

The view that decreased social network size is negative for older adults across the board is not supported by socioemotional selectivity theory. However, disasters have the capability of disrupting such networks and consequently older adults are more likely to suffer longer lasting or permanent negative consequences due to difficulties in reengaging or replacing such connections.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose is to better guide future decisions regarding disaster management with older adults in mind while considering the issues of loneliness and social isolation.

Q1: Do longitudinal health and retirement surveys currently have questions that provide information regarding social isolation and loneliness in respondents>

Q2: How many of the longitudinal surveys across countries addressed towards older adults have questions asked to survey respondents pertaining to loneliness and social isolation?

Q3: How are these relevant questions pertaining to loneliness and social isolation grouped categorically in these longitudinal surveys?

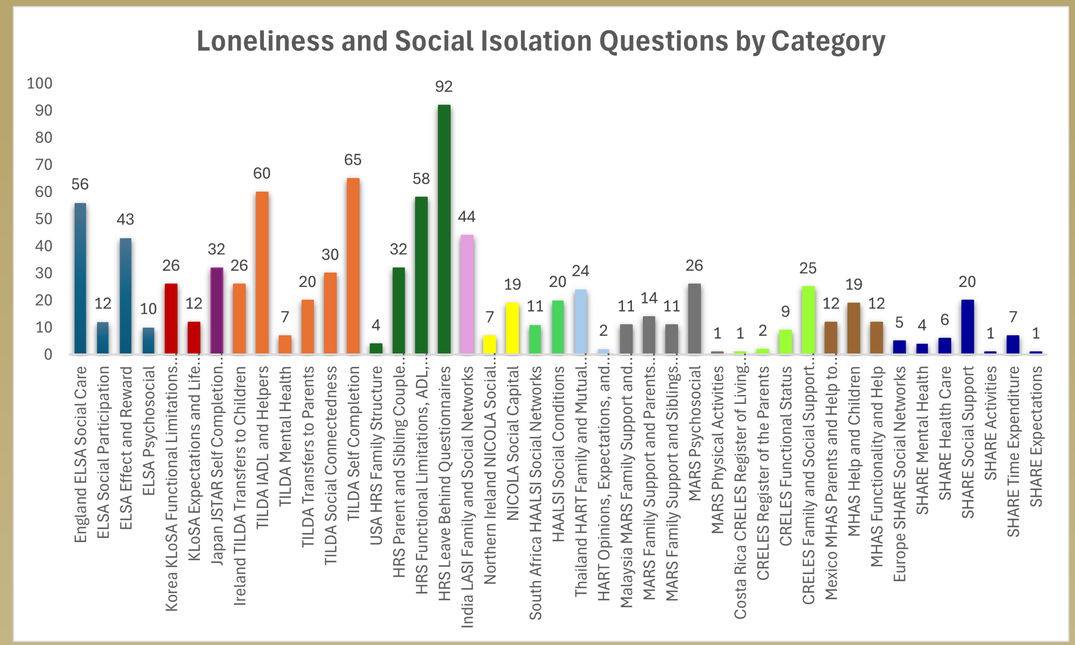
Hypothesis: The United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea have the most questions due to their high-profile loneliness campaigns as well as the United States due to its survey being the first.

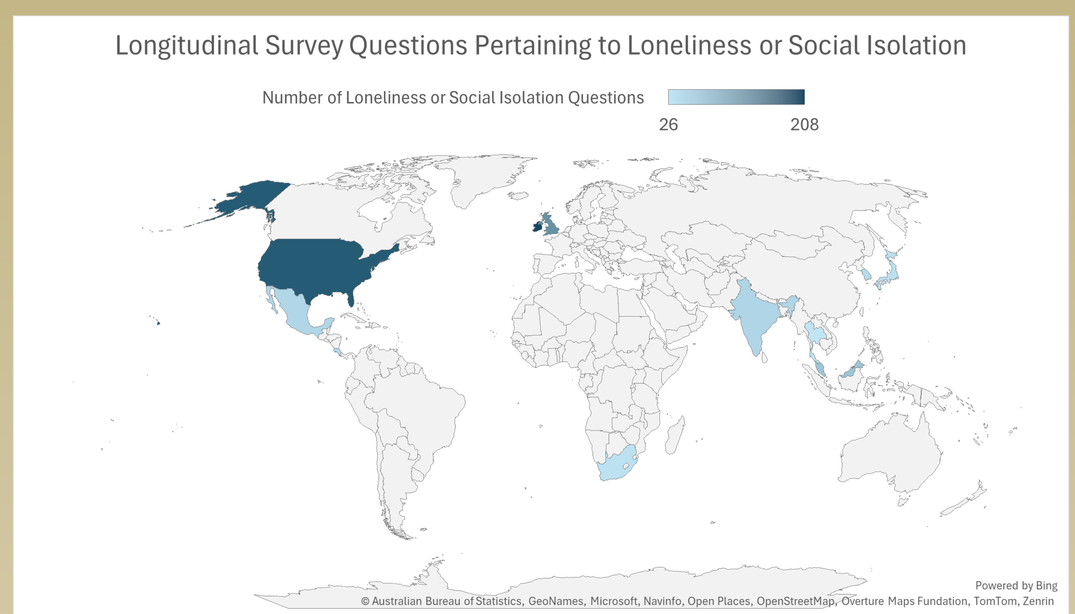
Methods

Using data from the Gateway to Global Aging (funded by the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Aging), how social isolation and loneliness can be assessed in different countries can itself be quantified and subsequently evaluated categorically. Though the basic definitions of loneliness and social isolation remain constant, the questions used in the instruments to assess older adults vary quantifiably and categorically.

Results from 12 countries (with two of these being England and Northern Ireland) and most of one continent (SHARE representing some of Europe) are reported in the presented chart. The most recent available year was used for each of the surveys in the analysis. In addition, instruments from China and Brazil did not display any relevant questions. Instruments from Chile and Thailand could not be accessed.

The world map shows the countries that had relevant questions on their survey instruments. Please note that due to current user limitations regarding the map projection, the results for England were projected to include the rest of the United Kingdom even though Northern Ireland has its own data while Scotland and Wales are not the foci of the data collected.





Results and Discussion

The biggest surprise was that the Republic of Ireland's survey TILDA had the highest number of pertinent questions used on a quantitative level, and among these questions also had the most insightful questions in examining the social circumstances of respondents.

Some of the hypothesized expectations did not match the eventual findings. The hypothesis that the United States would have a high number of relevant survey questions was demonstrated to be correct, likely due to the longer history and increased iterations of the instrument. England also did have a very high number of questions used as well. Japan and South Korea were relatively low, given the high-profile campaigns having taken place in both countries lately. The other surprise would be the findings from Malaysia which seemed to be heavily weighed towards familial relations and psychosocial circumstances.

Consequently, it is hoped that future iterations of the longer running instruments such as those used in Costa Rica, Japan, and South Korea will have an increased number of relevant questions in future waves. It should be noted that this population may have difficulty with answering some questions without assistance but nevertheless, the findings could prove useful for understanding the current social needs of older adults and predicting societal trends based on life circumstances.

The absence of relevant questions from the CHARLS study in China and the ELSI study in Brazil is unfortunate given both the large sizes of their populations and the wide variety of hazards that their populations face. It is possible that future revisions of these surveys may include relevant subcategories and questions as the issues of social isolation and loneliness gain greater attention.

Directions for Future Research

A subsequent study ought to use STATA or SPSS to further analyze the findings from the respondents of the surveys. Although the Gateway to Global Aging has some capacities for analysis on its website, a deeper dive into some of the questions unique to certain surveys can be more effective with direct datasets. Of note would be the Irish TILDA dataset featuring several unique questions not found in any of the other international longitudinal surveys.

Unfortunately, the TILDA website is now only accessible to researchers in the European Union due to recent changes regarding data availability. This absence is a disappointment given that the more recent waves of the TILDA survey included quite a few questions regarding loneliness and social needs. It would strengthen further research efforts to have access to this data and have the capability to assess its respondents, particularly over time although that would also depend on which waves the relevant questions were introduced.

Ireland demonstrates the highest levels of reported loneliness, but the Irish age demographics are on average younger than many other countries in Europe. As heavily inspired by but most likely predating the pandemic, the issues of loneliness and social isolation are also likely to have profound consequences for many facets such as the futures of educational systems and the workforce. A future direction could also involve assessing how loneliness and social isolation are being studied in youth as well as the implications for disaster preparedness in this demographic age group as well.

All statistics courtesy of the Gateway to Global Aging Data located at https://www.g2aging.org/

The relevant survey instruments used were the 2018 ELSA (England), the 2014 KLoSA (Republic of Korea), the 2012 JSTAR (Japan), the 2016 TILDA (Republic of Ireland), the 2018 HRS (United States of America), the 2018 SHARE (Europe, the 2016 LASI (India), the 2012 NICOLA (Northern Ireland), the 2014 HAALSI (South Africa), the 2016 HART (Thailand), the 2018 MARS (Malaysia), the 2012 CRELES (Costa Rica), the 2018 MHAS (Mexico), the 2018 CHARLS (China), and the 2020 ELSI (Brazil).