

The role of stigma in loneliness

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Loneliness in the EU: Cross-Cutting Issues for Research

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Dominant approach to loneliness

- Demographic characteristics: age, gender, region, etc
- Individual level traits: extroversion, neuroticism, social skills, etc



➤ Understandable:

- Private experience, dominance of science from individualistic contexts

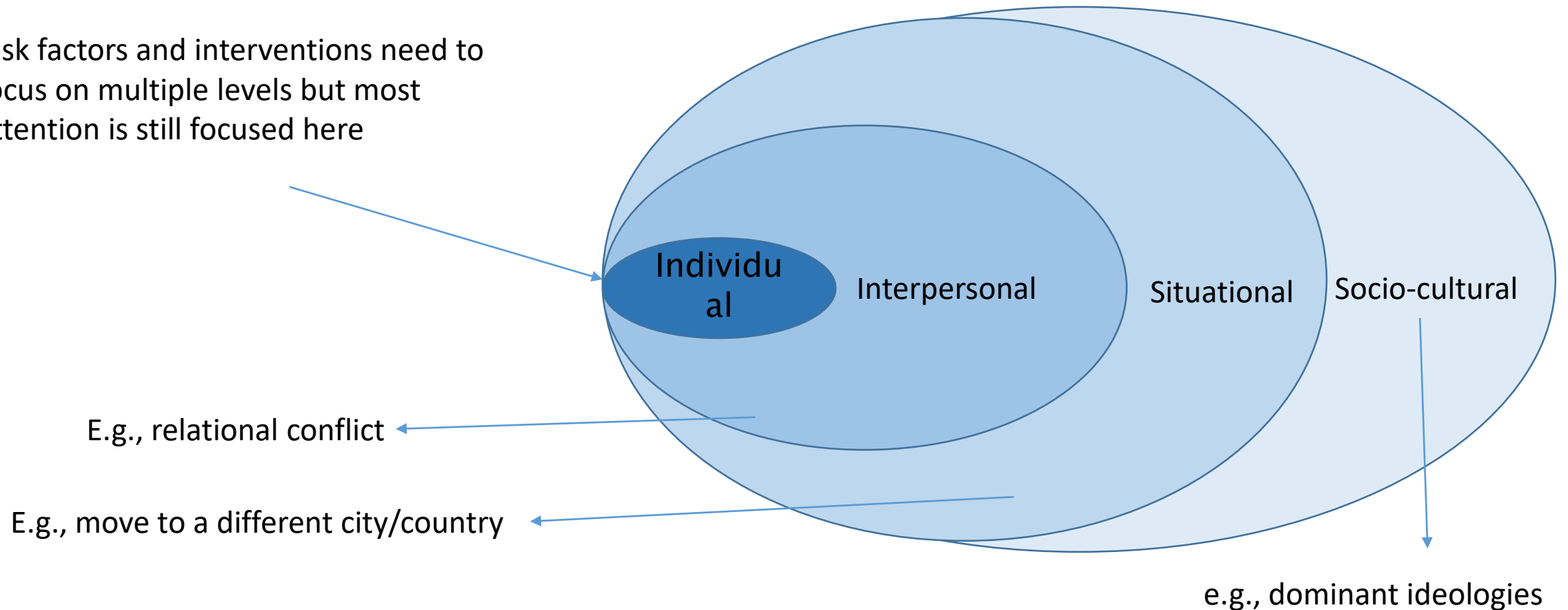
➤ But problematic:

- Does not account for the *social nature* of loneliness
- Factors not easily changeable—*stigmatization* of loneliness
- Obscures need for *societal and structural change*



Multiple levels are involved

Risk factors and interventions need to focus on multiple levels but most attention is still focused here

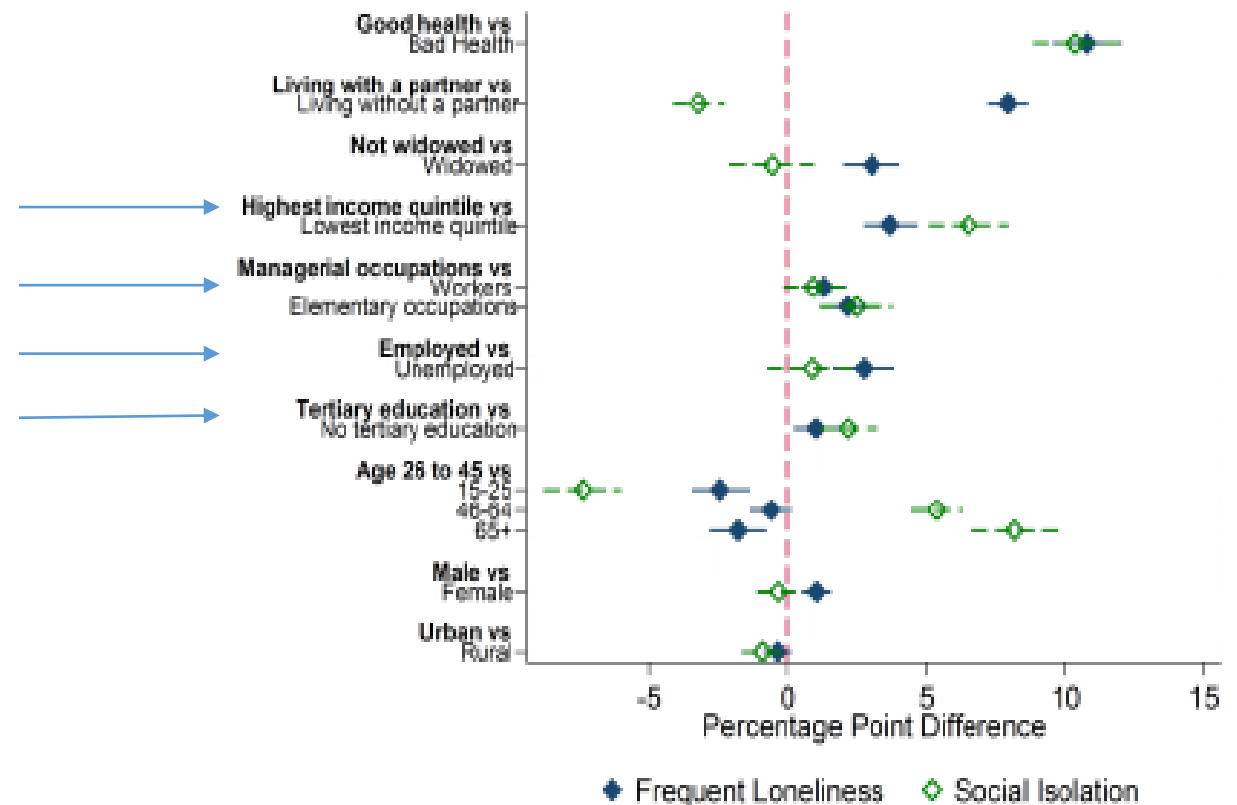


Risk factors at EU level

- Includes unemployment and low SES.
- Explanations offered: Financial resources, lack of professional networks, etc.
- But can stigma also be involved?

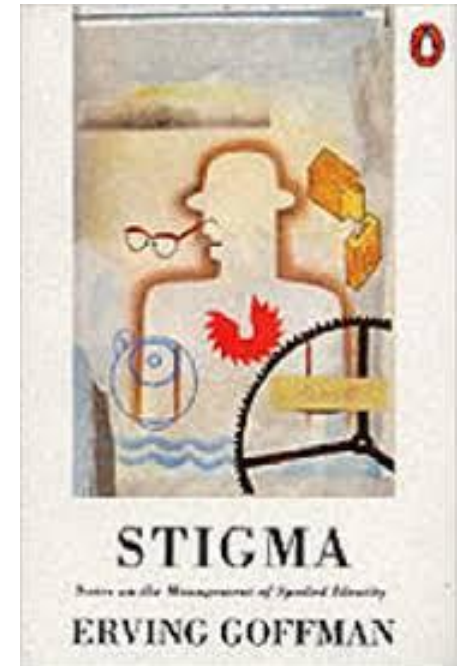


Figure 4: Factors contributing to frequent loneliness and social isolation in Europe - selected results



What is social stigma?

- Results from a process of devaluation and stigmatization of specific attributes or identities—the emphasis should *not* be on the trait or identity
- A social construction:
 - Inherently relational
 - Contextual
 - Visible (discredited) and or concealable (discreditable)



Why might stigma be relevant to loneliness?

Loneliness results from the assessment:

- Am I left out?
- Are my relationships good enough?
- Affected by stigmatization:
 - Inclusion / exclusion
 - Value, respect, trust, equality
- Likely partly accounts for loneliness disparities: Race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender, SES/class, etc.



Some documented loneliness disparities

- **Ethnicity** (Visser & El Fakiri, 2016)
- **Employment status** (Morrish & Medina-Lara, 2021)
- **Disability** (Lasgaard et al., 2010; Locke et al., 2010)
- **Gender and sexual minorities** (Anderssen et al., 2020; Doyle & Molix, 2016)
- **Mental health status** (Lasgaard et al., 2011)
- **Migration status** (Madsen et al., 2016; Victor et al., 2012)
- **Physical illness** (Bosman et al., 2015; Maes et al., 2017)
- **Poverty** (Madsen et al., 2019; Qualter et al., in press)

Ways in which stigma plays a role

- Exclusion
- Motivating withdrawal
- Blaming people for the loneliness they feel
- Restricting what it means to be sociable



BBC Loneliness Experiment



- 2018
- Approx. 55,000 participants
- Ages 16-99
- 237 countries, islands, and territories
- Recruited through adverts in various media, including BBC Radio 4 and BBC World

Collaboration between academic team, the BBC and the Wellcome Collection

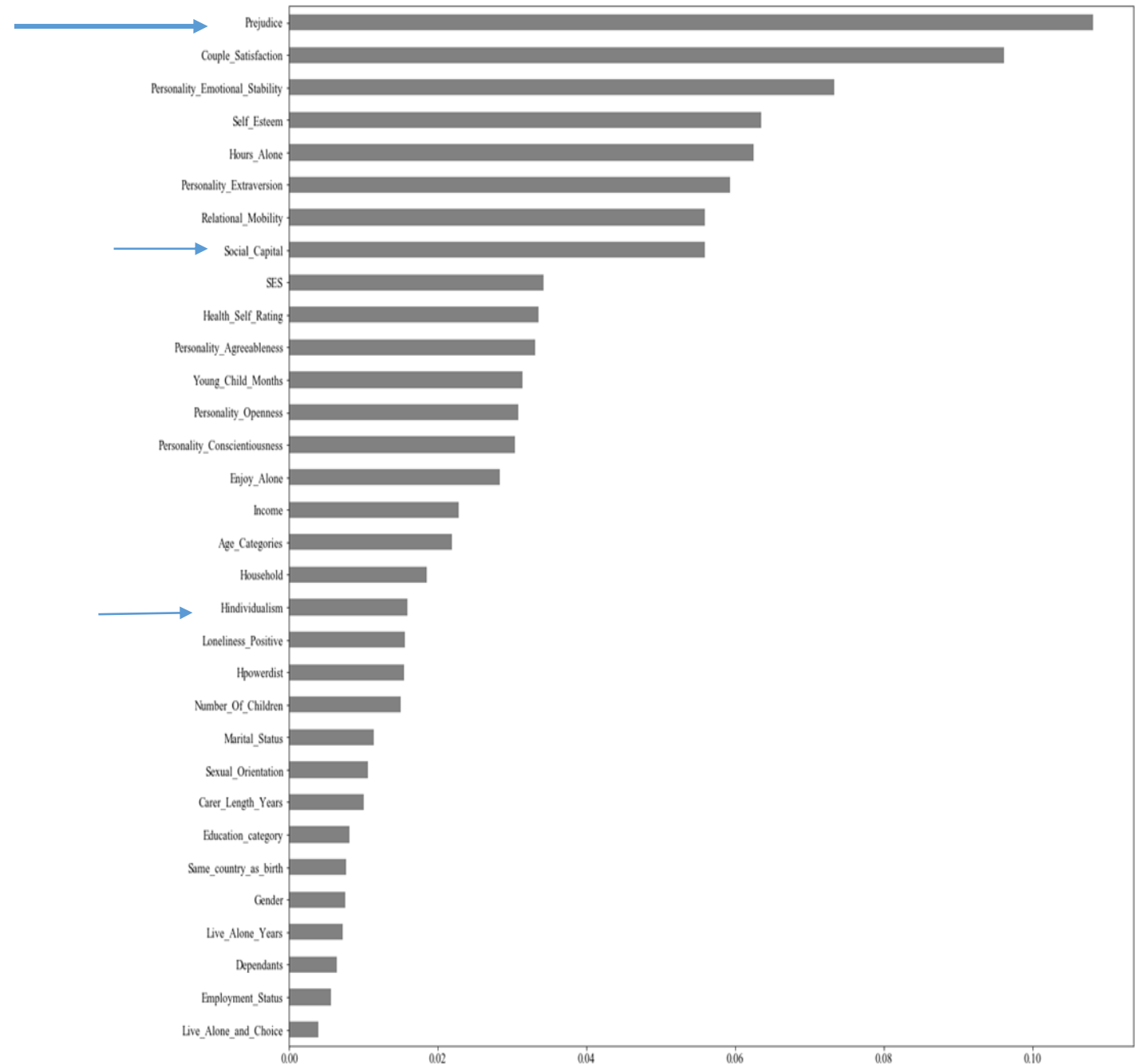
Experiences with daily discrimination

E.g., “How often in your daily life are you treated with less courtesy than other people”

Emerged as the most important of 32 predictors of loneliness frequency.

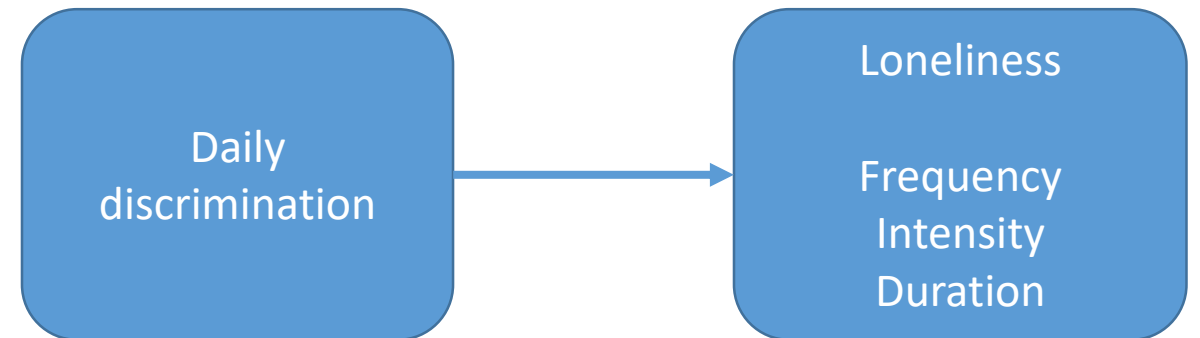


BBC Loneliness Experiment



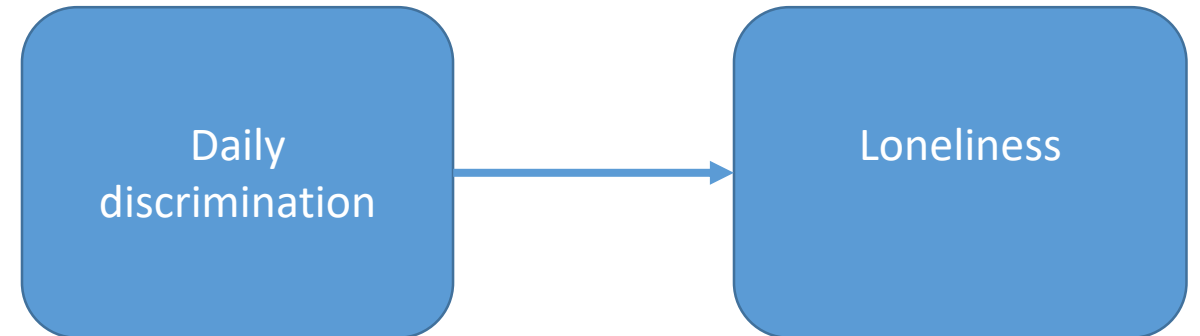
Daily experiences with discrimination

- Associated with greater **frequency**, **intensity**, and **duration** of loneliness
- Irrespective of culture, sex, age, education, or SES
- **Disparities in loneliness** between members of minority/stigmatized and majority groups: e.g., sexual minorities, SES status, unemployed.
- Disparities **reduced** when daily experiences with discrimination accounted for.



Similar findings for:

- Stigma associated with mental illness (Alasmawi et al., 2020): independent of specific diagnosis and symptoms.
- Racial discrimination (Doyle et al., in prep; Priest et al., 2017).
- Discrimination based on migrant status (Wang et al., 2020)



But *how* does stigma increase loneliness?

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Exclusion: Pushing people out

Stigmatization drives exclusion

- A key function of stigmatization is to keep people who are different from the dominant group out (Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008)
- Those who are stigmatized are less often included
 - In schools: More bullying and victimization
 - At work: More harassment, smaller and less influential professional networks
 - In leisure activities, neighbourhood activities, etc.



Exclusion in neighbourhoods

- Living in deprived areas = more loneliness (Kearns et al., 2015; Scharf & de Jong Gierveld, 2008)
 - Deprivation both subjective and objectively evaluated
- Neighbourhood effects *not* necessarily down to their objective characteristics but attributed to how people appraise their neighbourhood (Matthews et al., 2019)
- People have different experiences of their neighbourhood

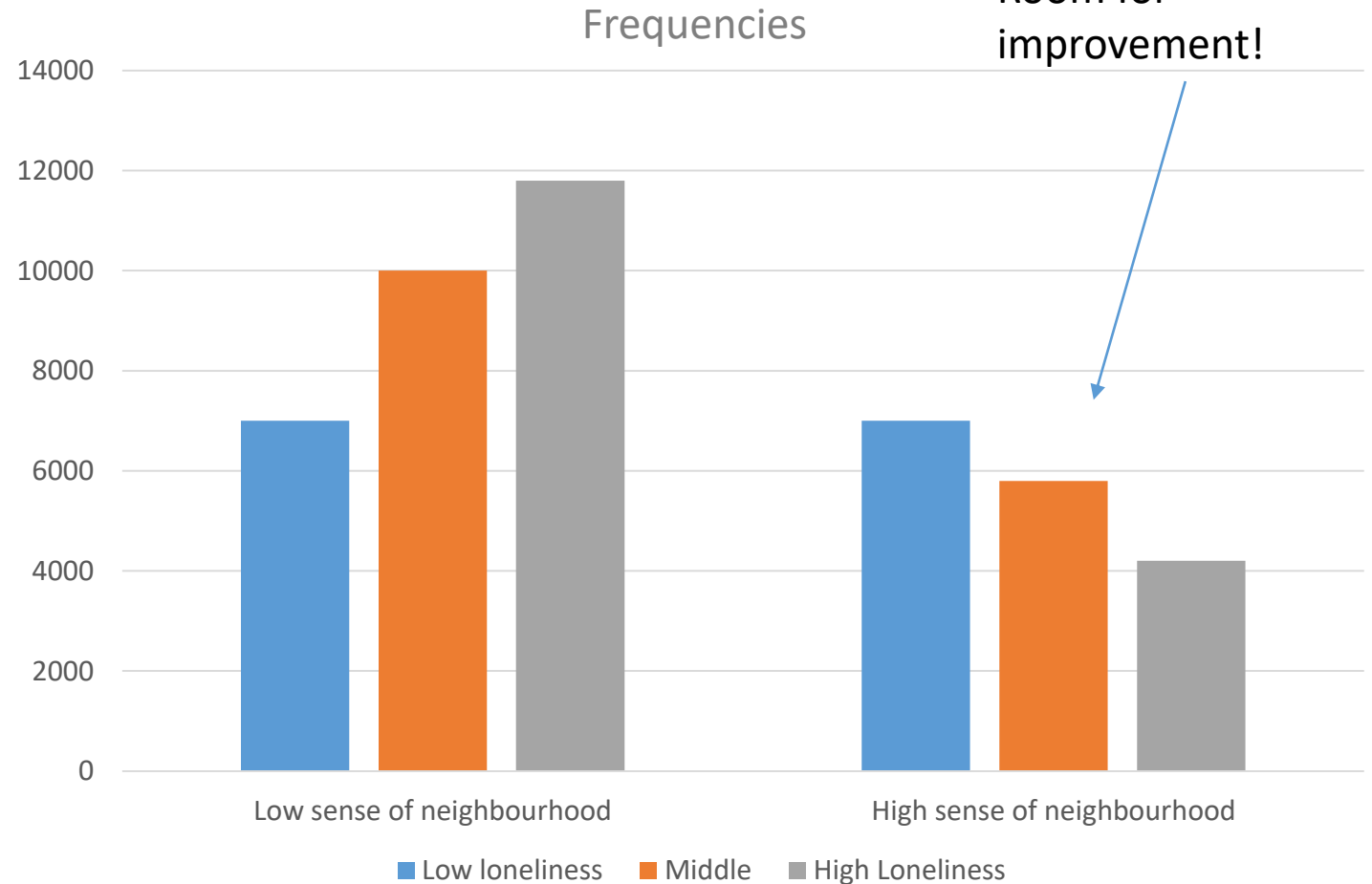


Sense of neighbourhood

- E.g., “People around here are willing to help their neighbours”
- More people reported feeling lonely when sense of neighbourhood was weak



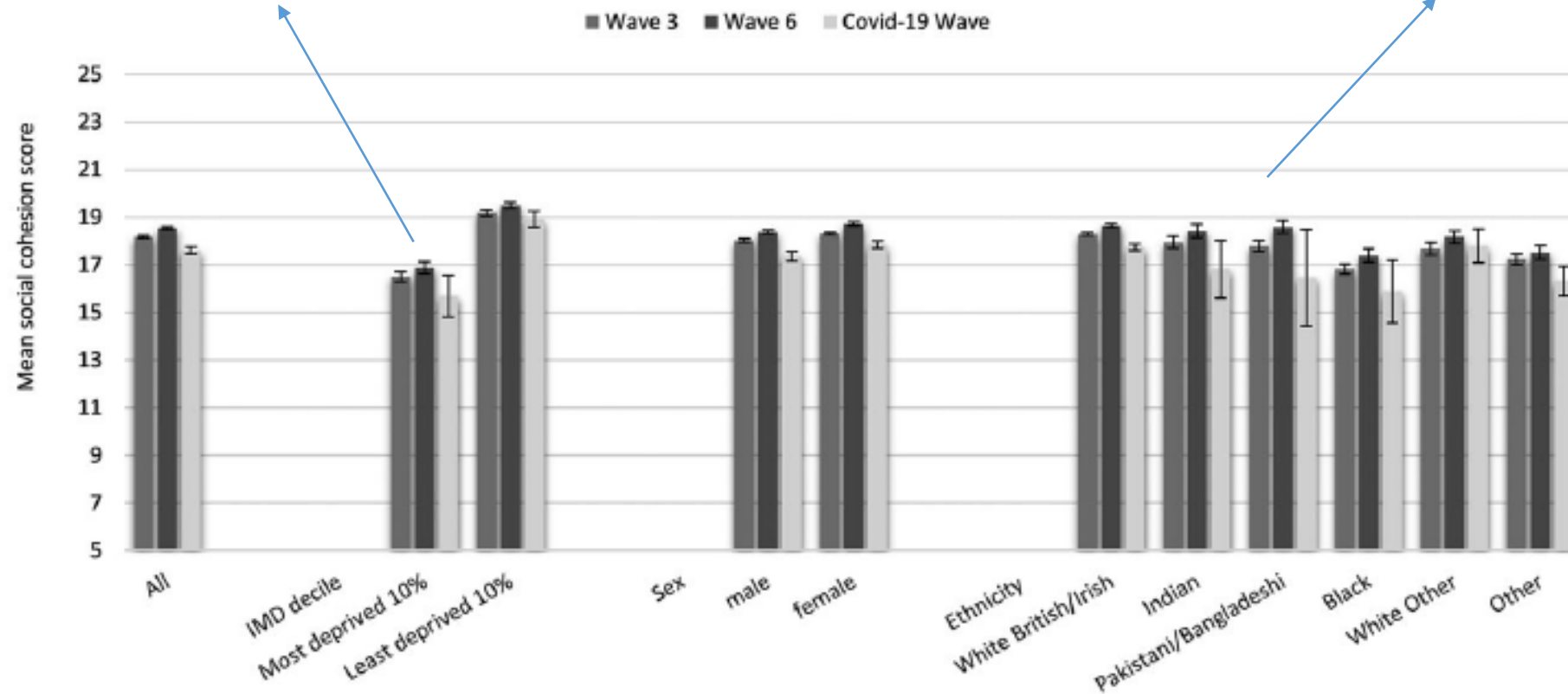
BBC Loneliness Experiment



Social cohesion pre and post Covid-19

Less cohesion in most deprived areas

And for Black or East Asian residents



Frequency of racial insults and attacks in neighbourhood

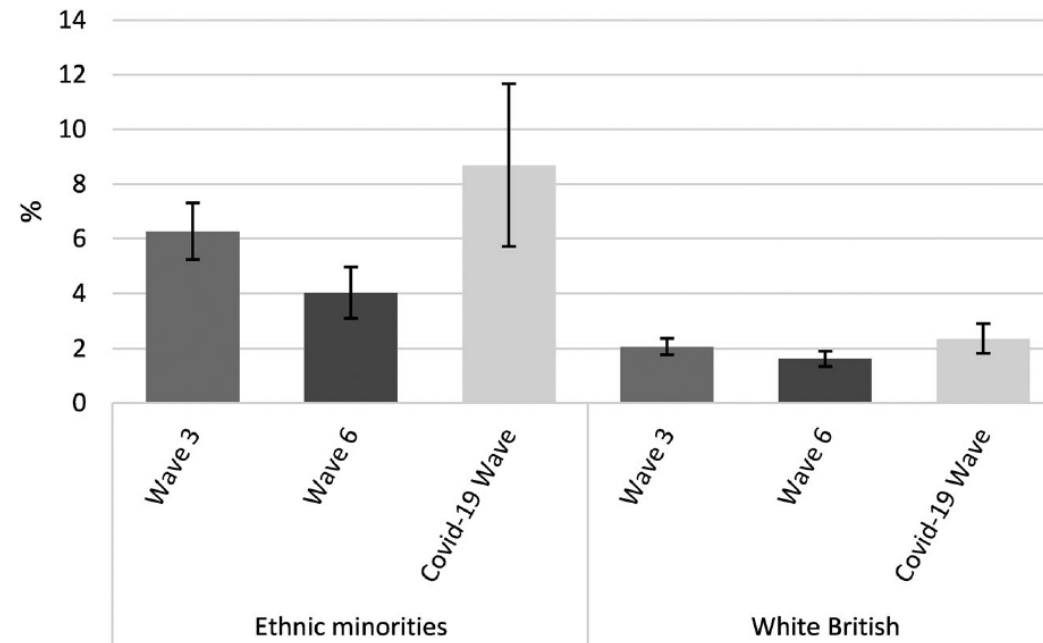


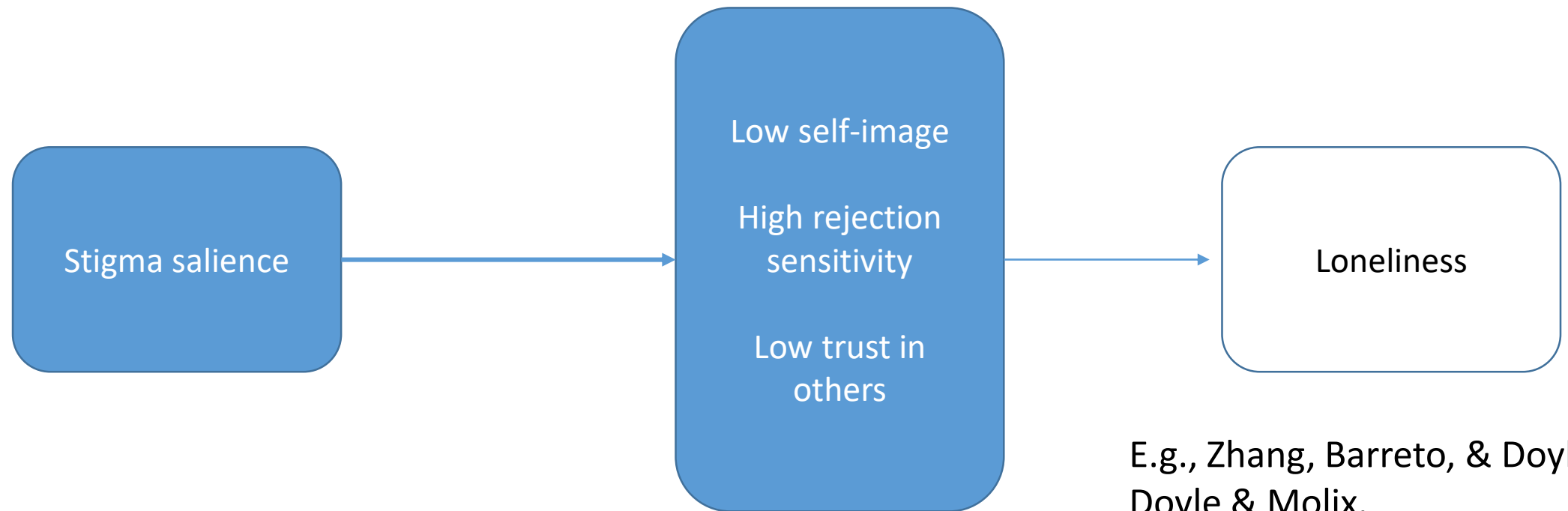
Figure 5. Percentage of Ethnic Minority and White British respondents stating that racial insults and attacks are very/ fairly common in their local area at Wave 3, Wave 6 and Covid-19 Wave. Weighted results with 95% CI. (Data: Understanding Society, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research 2020)

But *how* does stigma increase loneliness?

Motivating social withdrawal

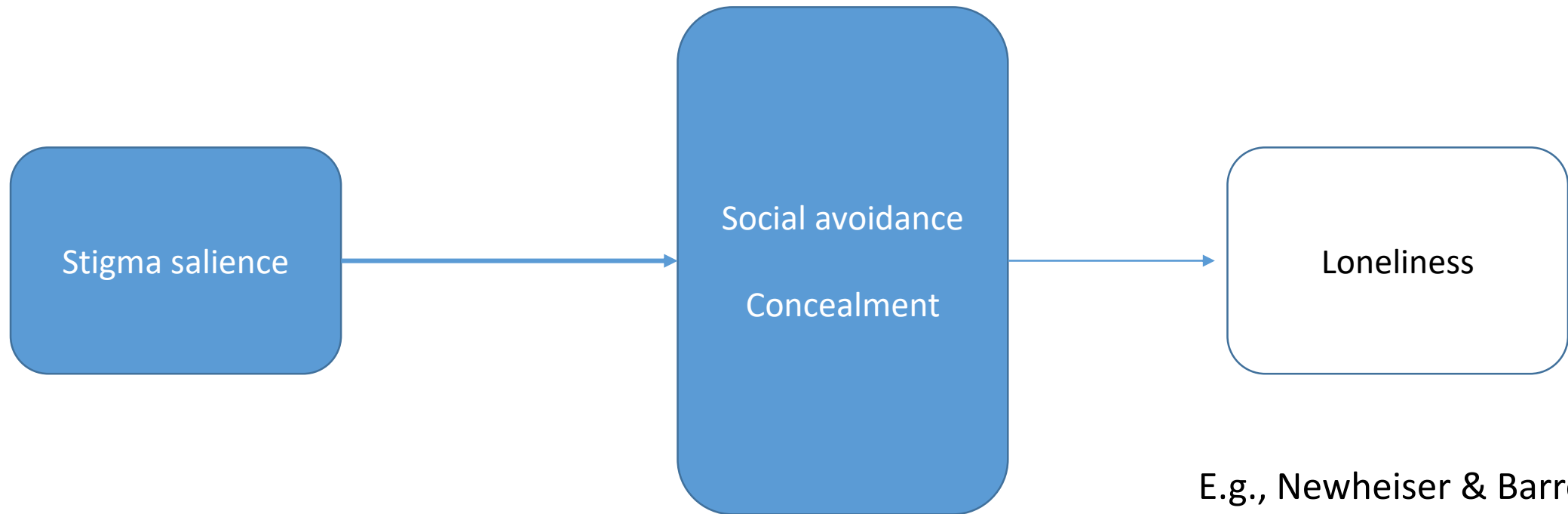
Effects of stigma on social engagement

- Effects of stigma on psychological wellbeing that lead to suboptimal social engagement



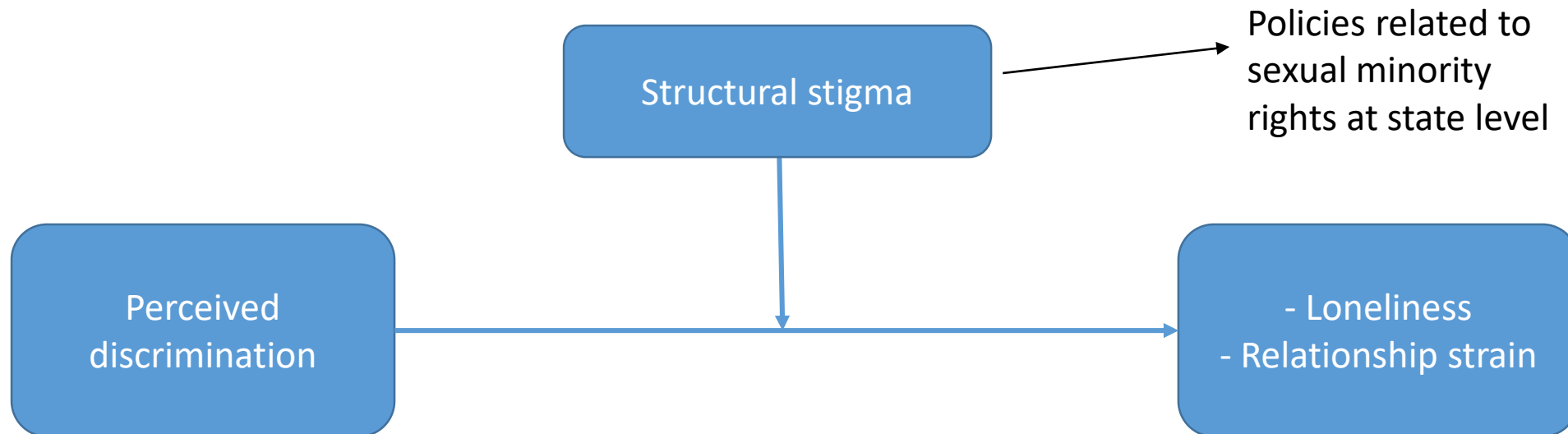
Effects of stigma on social engagement

- Use of coping strategies that hinder belonging
 - E.g., social avoidance, concealing stigmatized identities



The role of structural stigma

Structural stigma strengthens the negative association between discrimination and relationship functioning among sexual minorities (US)



But *how* does stigma increase loneliness?

Blaming people: The stigma of loneliness

The stigma of loneliness

Previously

- Derogation of those who feel, or admit to feeling, lonely (Borys & Perlman, 1985; Lay & Gruen, 1992)

- Comparison between those who are described in vignettes as lonely vs. not

- Plenty of confounds except for Kerr & Stanley (2020)—who found little evidence of derogation



vs.



The stigma of loneliness

Multiple elements:

- Negative impression
- Blame (controllable attributions)



ENDORSED STIGMA

Directed towards “the lonely other”:
those who feel, or admit to feeling, lonely

-Perceived stigma from the community



PERCEIVED STIGMA

How exposure to stigma is often assessed

-Shame

-Concealment



INTERNALISED STIGMA

About the “lonely self”



BBC Loneliness Experiment

Endorsed stigma

-Impression:

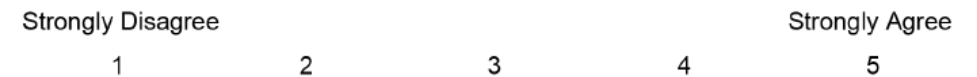
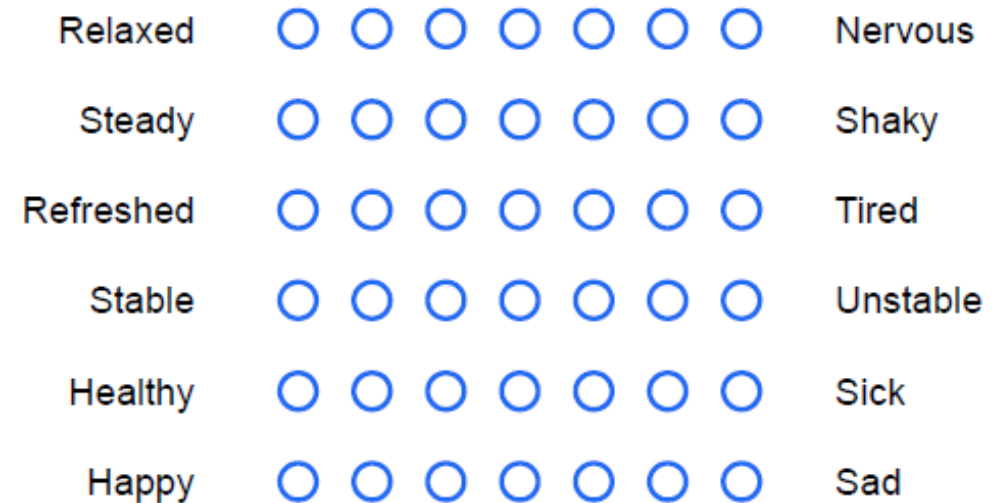
“Imagine a person feeling lonely. What do you think about them?”

*21 traits

*Comparisons to mid-point and across predictors

-Blame (controllable attributions)

“To what extent do you agree or disagree that the feeling of loneliness is caused by something a person can change?” and (...) “is caused by something they can control?”



BBC Loneliness Experiment

Perceived and internalised stigma

-Perceived stigma from the community

Below, you will find statements about the community in which you live. Think about your community and say whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

In general, people in the community where I live think that people who are lonely are less worthy than others

-Shame (internalised stigma)

Think about a time when you have felt lonely. How much do you disagree or agree with the following statements.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

When I feel lonely, I feel ashamed about it.

-Concealment—work scenario

If you were to find yourself in this situation, having this conversation with your colleague, would you choose to reveal this fact about yourself or would you, instead, choose to conceal the fact that you are lonely?

Would definitely reveal

Unsure

Would definitely not reveal

1 2 3 4 5 6 7



BBC Loneliness Experiment



Overall stigma of loneliness

- Positive impressions of people who feel lonely
- Low controllability
- Low perceived community stigma
- Relatively high shame when lonely
- Relatively high inclination to conceal loneliness

No endorsed stigma

Little perceived stigma

Some internalised stigma



Effects of age

Controlling for effects on own loneliness:

- Impressions of people who feel lonely: No difference
- **Controllability: Young < Old**
- **Perceived community stigma: Young > Old**
- **Shame when lonely: Young > Old**
- **Inclination to conceal loneliness: Young > Old**

More endorsed stigma
in older people
(cohort, experience?)

More perceived stigma in
young people

More internalised stigma
in young people



Effects of gender

Controlling for effects on own loneliness:

- Impressions of people who feel lonely: No difference
- **Controllability: Female < Male**
- **Perceived community stigma: Female < Male**
- **Shame when lonely: Female > Male**
- Inclination to conceal loneliness: No difference

More endorsed stigma
in men

More perceived stigma in
men

More internalised stigma
in women
(gendered emotion?)



Effects of individualism-collectivism

Controlling for effects on own loneliness:

- Impressions of people who feel lonely: No difference
- **Controllability: Individualistic < Collectivist**

More endorsed stigma
in collectivist environments

- **Perceived community stigma: Individualistic < Collectivist**

More perceived stigma in
collectivism environments

- Shame when lonely: No difference
- Inclination to conceal loneliness: No difference

No difference in
internalised stigma



In sum

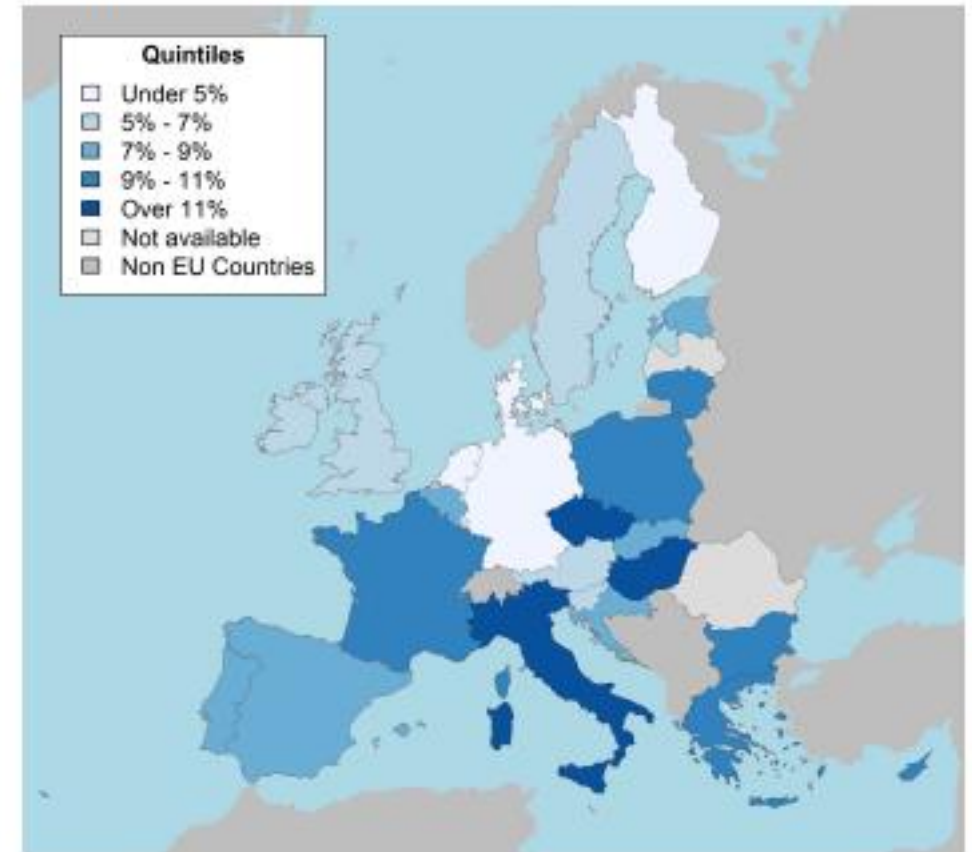
- Stronger stigmatizing views among men, young people, and those in collectivist environments
- Reasons:
 - Social comparison: More sociality expected from young people and those in collectivist environments
 - Gender effect: Possibly refers more to derogation of emotionality than of loneliness per se (?)



Implication for understanding prevalence data

- Stigma is likely to affect understanding of one's experience as, and admit to, loneliness. Important to consider:
- How much 'hidden loneliness'?
- Are prevalence differences, differences in stigma?
- Already considered with 'direct questions' but: Also likely an issue with 'indirect questions'

Figure 1: Prevalence of frequent loneliness across Europe



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

But *how* does stigma increase loneliness?

Restricting notions of sociality

Restricting notions of sociality

- Dominant groups form the reference against which others are evaluated as deficient—even in research!
- Social skill training = giving minorities the social skills the majority approves
 - E.g., autism
 - Perpetuates separation and promotes deficient social skills in the majority
- More inclusive notions and practices can improve:
 - Willingness to know and adjust to the 'other'
 - Social interactions and sense of belonging



Conclusion



- Loneliness as a product of exclusive communities.
- We need to move beyond individualistic approaches to loneliness and narratives about loneliness and mental health that are incomplete and further stigmatize and perpetuate inequalities by blinding to societal and structural factors and solutions.
- Loneliness is not just a “public health issue” but also a social justice issue.

Thank you

Collaborators:



BBC Loneliness Experiment



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