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Loneliness Among Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic


The Role of Family and Community
Social Capital

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Nan LU 
Department of Social Work and Social
Policy, School of Sociology and Population
Studies
Renmin University of China
Beijing, China

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To the fireworks on the beach

Preface

Research on population aging is one of the major research fields in social work, social policy, psychology, demography, medicine, and nursing. From a life course perspective, people's social needs change across different life stages. Given that population aging is a worldwide phenomenon, almost all major social institutions and social services across countries and regions have undergone great transitions and will continue to evolve to meet the social and medical needs of older populations. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) not only changed society at a macro-level (e.g., political and economic systems), but also changed individuals' lifestyles and social lives. Older adults have been particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those with chronic conditions and low socioeconomic status. Extensive studies have been conducted to examine the influence of COVID-19 on the physical health of older adults. It is important to note that COVID-19 also affects mental well-being, which could have a prolonged effect on general well-being in later life. In this book, I focus on the relationship between social capital and loneliness among older adults living in urban China during COVID-19.

I seek to deliver two key messages in this book. The first is the fundamental principle of the social work profession: Social relationships matter for sustaining and promoting people's well-being, especially vulnerable populations. The second is that during this difficult time, the solidarity and consideration of others' feelings and safety are playing crucial roles in stopping the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially important for protecting older adults, who are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic.

I started to pursue my Ph.D. in social work in 2010 and began my academic career as a university lecturer in 2013. I have spent my entire academic life conducting research on social capital and well-being in later life. Although I am in my early middle age, I have had the great fortune to learn from my older mentors and friends. They play a crucial role in my life. Professor Fran Waugh was my supervisor when I was a M.Phil. student at the University of Sydney. My English was poor at that time. She not only patiently taught me how to conduct social research, but also introduced her best friend, Megan Buscombe, to teach me academic writing. Megan is a retired school teacher and an expert in the English literature. She treated me like her grandson

since the first day we met. In the past 13 years, I not only learned how to write in English in an academic manner from her, but also became deeply inspired by her wisdom and the way she sees this world. Working with older adults has become my profession and passion. I hope I have the privilege to continue this academic path until I become an older adult.

I have summarized the major contents of the nine chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: The significance of Loneliness in later life in the context of COVID-19 pandemic

- Loneliness among older adults during COVID-19.
- Impact of COVID-19 on loneliness among older adults.
- Negative consequences of loneliness on well-being in later life.
- Brief discussion of social capital and loneliness.
- Demographic characteristics of the older Chinese population.
- Health disparities in the older Chinese population.
- Aging policies in China before and after 1978.
- Five-year plans of aging policies in China since 2000.

Chapter 2: How to understand loneliness in later life?

- Theoretical models of social determinants of loneliness among older adults, including cognitive behavioral theories, environmental gerontology, socioemotional selectivity theory, evolutionary theory of loneliness, and life course perspective.
- Theoretical framework of social capital and loneliness, including the conceptualization and operationalization of social capital (i.e., collectivist and individualist perspectives of family-based and community-based social capital definitions, measurement of community-based cognitive and structural social capital).

Chapter 3: Social capital and loneliness

- A brief report of social determinants of loneliness, including age, gender, education level, income, living alone, and physical health status.
- Empirical evidence in research on social capital and loneliness.
- Summary of research gaps in the literature.
- Study objectives and significance of the study.
- Three hypotheses based on social capital theory and the literature.
- Introduction of background information on local communities, sampling procedures, inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview training, interview process, survey questionnaire content, and final sample size.
- Measurement of social and emotional loneliness.
- Measurement of cognitive and structural social capital.
- Measurement of family social capital from a family support and network perspective.

- Measurement of covariates, including age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, living alone, and physical health.
- Specific procedures of regression models with interaction terms.
- Descriptive statistics of the sample, including sociodemographic characteristics and socioeconomic status.
- Regression models of loneliness testing the relationship between family and community social capital and social and emotional loneliness.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 4: The moderating role of age and gender in the relationship between social capital and loneliness

- Literature of age, gender, and loneliness. Both significant and nonsignificant results are summarized.
- Regression models with interaction terms testing whether age and gender significantly moderated the relationship between social capital and loneliness.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 5: The moderating role of marital status and living alone in the relationship between social capital and loneliness

- Literature of marital status, living alone, and loneliness. Both significant and nonsignificant results are summarized.
- Regression models with interaction terms testing whether marital status and living alone significantly moderated the relationship between social capital and loneliness.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 6: The role of social capital in affecting loneliness among older adults with different socioeconomic status

- Literature of education, income, and loneliness. Both significant and nonsignificant results are summarized.
- Regression models with interaction terms testing whether education and income significantly moderated the relationship between social capital and loneliness.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 7: The role of social capital in affecting loneliness among older adults with different physical health status

- Literature of IADLs, number of chronic diseases, self-rated health, and loneliness. Both significant and nonsignificant results are summarized.
- Regression models with interaction terms testing whether IADLs, number of chronic diseases, self-rated health significantly moderated the relationship between social capital and loneliness.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 8: The mechanism linking structural social capital, cognitive social capital and loneliness

- Theoretical rationale of the interplay between community-based cognitive social capital and structural social capital.
- Analytic procedures of structural equation modeling, including measurement model, structural model, and model fit.
- Structural equation modeling testing the mediation role of community-based cognitive social capital on the association between structural social capital and loneliness; a measurement model of social capital established first and a structural model conducted to test the mediation effect of cognitive social capital.
- A brief discussion of the findings.

Chapter 9: Implications of the findings and conclusions

- Discussion of policy and intervention implications of the findings.
- Limitations of the present study.
- General conclusions.

Beijing, China

Nan LU

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Vivian Lou and Professor Qian Sun. They have provided many valuable suggestions on the survey design and theoretical development that are the basis of this book. I am also grateful to Ms. Haiqin Meng. She helped me to contact the authorities and community leaders in the urban communities of Shanghai and was responsible for organizing and conducting the structured interviews, which were completed in an efficient manner. I am thankful to all the respondents who participated in this survey. They are the key to the successful completion of this book. I learned not only accurate and in-depth information about loneliness during COVID-19 from them, but also the spirit of resilience, optimism, empathy, and collectivism. Furthermore, I am thankful to Ms. Meng Chen's support, particularly in terms of organizing and summarizing the literature and theoretical framework of social determinants of loneliness.

Finally, I am grateful to Professor Bei Wu. I am inspired by her paper titled "Social isolation and loneliness among older adults in the context of COVID-19: A global challenge" published in *Global Health Research and Policy*. She is also a life model for me, particularly terms of how to achieve academic excellence and keep a high level of academic performance in the long run.

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Chapter 1

The Significance of Loneliness in Later Life in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic



1.1 Loneliness in Later Life During COVID-19 Pandemic: An International Perspective

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID-19 became a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Older adults and those with comorbidities and poor immune systems were considered to be high-risk populations during this COVID-19 period (Dowd et al., 2020). Because no effective treatment existed for COVID-19 during the outbreak period in 2020, a range of COVID-19 restriction measures (e.g., social distancing and lockdowns) and vaccines were implemented by countries across the world to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Although governmental recommendations of COVID-19 restriction measures were found to efficiently reduce older adults' chances of infection of COVID-19, they have led to social and physical isolation worldwide (Choi et al., 2021; Gozansky et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Macdonald & Hülür, 2021; Sams et al., 2021; Stolz et al., 2021; Tyrrell & Williams, 2020).

To contain COVID-19 infections, millions of people have quarantined in local communities due to the physical and social distancing measures. Because the morbidity and mortality of this virus were found to be higher among older adults (especially those with chronic conditions and low socioeconomic status) as compared with younger groups, older adults are often advised to avoid social activities in public places and stay at home. Under such circumstances, older adults often experience disruptions in their daily routine and have difficulty accessing social networks and supportive resources that they need to meet their needs in terms of daily care, medical care, and socialization (Wu, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that the COVID-19 restriction measures led to loneliness among populations aged 65 or older in the United States and European countries in 2020 (Krendl & Perry, 2021; Luchetti et al., 2020; Macdonald & Hülür, 2021). The detrimental influence of social distancing on loneliness and mental well-being among older populations could be intensified if