

Special Issue: Aging Alone? International Perspectives on Social Integration and Isolation

Aging Alone? International Perspectives on Social Integration and Isolation

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Demographic shifts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have created a context in which rising numbers of older adults are “aging alone” worldwide. Declining fertility rates mean that older adults today have fewer children than in the past, a scenario that is most acute in societies that have maintained restrictive population policies, and where childlessness rates are high. Due to processes of urbanization and globalization, adult children may migrate far distances from their aging parents to pursue rewarding economic opportunities. Rising rates of gray divorce mean that older adults may no longer live with a spouse. Recent research by [Margolis and Verdery \(2017\)](#) found that 6.6% of U.S. adults ages 55 and older have neither a living spouse nor biological children and 1% lack a partner/spouse, any children, biological siblings, and biological parents—with these rates rising across successive cohorts. The proportion of U.S. older adults who are “elder orphans”—growing old without a spouse, child, or proximate kin—is projected to reach as high as 20% in future cohorts ([Carney, Fujiwara, Emmert, Liberman, & Paris, 2016](#)).

Less is known about the levels and consequences of aging alone worldwide. This special issue of *JGSS* seeks to fill that gap. The issue features nine papers on late-life social isolation, focusing on older adults in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, and representing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The term “aging alone” can mean many things; the research featured in this issue encompass those aging without any close kin, who live alone, whose social networks are constrained, who lack a particular kin tie such as spouse or child, whose kin live far away, or those who feel their social ties are deficient.

The first step toward understanding isolated elders is to document who they are, how common the experience is, and how these patterns vary both between and within countries.

The lead article, “Kinlessness around the World” documents how common it is for contemporary older adults to lack living kin, and whether such individuals are uniformly disadvantaged around the world. [Verdery and colleagues \(2019\)](#) examine survey data from 34 nations, accounting for 70% of the world’s population age 50 and older. Levels of kinlessness, defined as having neither a spouse nor biological child, range from just 2% in China and Korea, to more than 10% in wealthy western nations including Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. The impacts of kinlessness also vary widely. Although kinless older adults typically have self-rated health and levels of education comparable to or worse than their counterparts, the magnitude of these gaps varies dramatically, with some nations showing kinless persons’ advantage regarding health (e.g., Mexico) and educational attainment (e.g., Greece, Italy). Whereas Verdery and colleagues measure “aging alone” in terms of the availability of first-degree kin and spouses, [Djundeva and colleagues \(2019\)](#) delve into cross-national differences in particular subtypes of “aging alone,” with their measures encompassing a diverse set of family and non-kin ties, as well as the nature of contact with these network members. They find that the likelihood of having “restricted” and “child-based” networks is greater in Eastern and Southern European countries, whereas the likelihood of having “friend-oriented” networks is greater in Western and Northern European countries. Across countries, only those with “restricted” networks have poorer well-being, whereas those with “diverse” networks have even better well-being than older adults who live with others.

The cross-national differences documented by Verdery, Djundeva, and colleagues are linked to demographic, social, and cultural factors. [Mair \(2019\)](#) focuses on one important

and under-researched factor: friendship. Using national-level data from the European Values Survey and individual-level data from the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe, Mair (2019) documents that older adults who lack kin or whose kin are unavailable report more friends in their social networks, particularly in countries with a higher percentage of people who believe that friends are "very important." Taken together, these studies underscore that experiences of "aging alone" vary widely, and are shaped by the cultural, social, and economic supports available in particular national contexts.

Three studies explore within-nation differences in aging alone. Taylor and colleagues (2019) explore differentials in the United States, whereas Gu et al. (2019) and Zhou and colleagues (2019) focus on China. Using data from the National Survey of American Life, Taylor and colleagues (2019) examine whether U.S. whites, African Americans, and Black Caribbeans differ with respect to eight indicators of objective social isolation. They find that very few older Americans are socially isolated, although whites are more likely than African Americans and Black Caribbeans to live alone, to be childless, and have limited contact with religious congregation members. Blacks in the south are particularly protected against social isolation. Gu and colleagues (2019) examine four waves of data from the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey and find that owning a home, having no living children, and preferring to live independently are positively correlated with living alone among Chinese elders, whereas living in a city, having economic independence, being educated, and having poor physical and cognitive functions reduce the odds of living alone. Zhou and colleagues (2019) analyze the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study and find that overall rates of kinlessness are low in China, such that less than 2% lack a spouse/partner and children. However, particular subtypes of kinlessness are especially common; more than twice as many older adults have no spouse/partner and no daughter (3.2%) as those who have no spouse/partner and no son (1.4%).

Understanding the physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being of older adults who lack meaningful ties is an important goal, as the number of adults aging alone is projected to increase worldwide in the coming decades. Studies focused on China show that kinless adults have poorer health, wealth, and economic support (Zhou et al., 2019), while older Chinese adults who live alone are more likely to feel lonely and have lower life satisfaction (Gu et al. 2019). Yet many Chinese elders who live alone show signs of resilience, including higher levels of engagement with social and leisure activities, and fewer physical impairments relative to their counterparts who coreside.

An intriguing puzzle is whether the psychosocial costs of aging alone have diminished in recent years, as the stigma historically linked with divorce and never-marrying has faded. Comparing the experiences of two birth cohorts of older adults in the Longitudinal Aging Study of

Amsterdam, van Tilburg and Suanet (2019) examine marital status differentials in social network size and diversity, as well as social support and well-being. They document improvement over time, with widowed persons faring better in 2013 than in 1993, with respect to network size, emotional support, and loneliness symptoms. Rising social and cultural support for diverse family types may have the unanticipated consequence of normalizing and diminishing the personal costs associated with later-life singlehood.

Particular subpopulations of older adults, including never married persons or those without nearby kin, are still small, so they account for relatively modest numbers of participants in large sample surveys. Consequently, qualitative researchers are well suited to dig deeply into the daily lives of those aging alone shedding light on their daily rituals, practices, and emotions. Torres (2019) draws on 5 years of ethnographic fieldwork among older adults in New York City to understand how neighborhood-based supports protect against isolation among older adults who live alone. The study reveals the powerful role of "daily gossip" or chatter about people and events in the local neighborhood. Older adults who congregate in local eateries used gossip to connect with one another, access social support, and create awareness of peers who may have fallen onto hard times and thus off their "social radar."

Qualitative studies also reveal how social isolation poses challenges for older adults in nations where public support for elder care is scarce, or social transformations are undermining the capacity of families to care for kin. Amurwon (2019) carried out in-depth life history interviews with 22 older adults in Uganda and found that many struggled to care and provide for themselves financially. Traditional care systems no longer provide a safety net, as those children and grandchildren who would otherwise provide care had outmigrated, or were lost to HIV/AIDS. However, public interventions like free health care helped older adults to adapt. Similar patterns were detected in the two post-Communist nations of Albania and Bulgaria (Conkova, Vullnetari, King, & Fokkema, 2019). Economic and regional declines, accompanied by outmigration of youth, deprived older adults of important supports. Conkova and colleagues (2019) did 29 in-depth interviews with older adults and participant observation in rural regions in Albania and Bulgaria, and discovered that both married and widowed older adults were socially isolated and detached, due largely to the migration of their children and grandchildren to more urbanized areas. To cope with this dearth of support, they relied on non-kin ties including neighbors, and lowered their expectations regarding the kinds of care they might receive from kin. Financial support also was critical, with Albanian older adults particularly benefiting from remittances that their children sent after migrating abroad.

In sum, the articles in this special issue document that aging alone is a multifaceted experience encompassing both being alone and feeling alone. Although those growing old alone generally experience more mental and physical health

symptoms than their counterparts growing old with the support of friends and families, many show tremendous resilience and adaptation, relying on friends, social engagements, and even public supports to help them manage the challenges of aging. Policy makers must be prepared to meet the needs of rising numbers of adults worldwide who are aging alone. Whether governments invest in the welfare state or support for family caregivers to provide private support requires careful and evidence-based decisions regarding precisely what it means to “age alone” in particular cultural and political contexts (Reher & Requena, 2018).

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