



# Introduction to the special section on loneliness across the life span

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## Abstract

We provide an overview of the topics included in the special section of the *International Journal of Behavioral Development* on *Loneliness Across the Life Span*. We highlight the use of a life span approach to understanding loneliness and the different methodological approaches adopted by researchers. This special issue contributes toward the development of a holistic research agenda addressing loneliness across the life course and away from a focus solely upon specific age groups such as adolescents, young adults, or older adults who have been the focus of most loneliness research until comparatively recently.

## Keywords

Loneliness, life span, development, age differences

This special section on *Loneliness Across the Life Span* brings together an international group of researchers from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In our editorial, we do not attempt to summarize the six papers included by highlighting their key points. Rather, we offer readers an editorial that focuses upon the principal advances the special issue makes to extending the state of the art in loneliness research. In drawing together this special issue, we sought to extend the evidence base of loneliness research by emphasizing the interdisciplinarity inherent in research in this area. This is reflected in our collection of papers that includes contributions from gerontology, developmental psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and social psychology. We propose that to comprehensively explore and understand loneliness as a phenomenon that affects all age groups, it is vital to bring together research from such diverse disciplines.

We have sought to consolidate and extend the notion that loneliness is experienced across the life span. Both Pearce and colleagues (2021) and Hawkley and colleagues (2021) adopt an explicitly life course approach to understanding loneliness including populations from 16 to 99 years, whereas other contributors focus on specific life stages. Geukens and colleagues (2021) and Yang and colleagues (2021) concentrate on adolescents, while Matthews and colleagues (2021) and Mund and colleagues (2021) focus upon adults. Methodological novelty is exemplified by the work of Matthews and colleagues (2021) who use a sample of twins, an approach closely associated with social or genetic epidemiology. Mund and colleagues (2021) use a dyadic couple-based approach to understanding loneliness rather than simply focusing upon individuals. Such an approach extends our understanding by placing loneliness within the context of dyadic relationships.

Our combination of studies that look at the life span, couples, twins, and young adults enables us to appreciate the universality of the experience of loneliness across the life span and the fact that loneliness is not the preserve of specific age groups. At the same time, it enables us to distinguish factors that are universally associated with loneliness from those that are specific to particular age groups or life stages. Hawkley and colleagues (2021) demonstrate

that a range of predictors of loneliness are universal across the adult life course, notably living alone, widowhood, poor health, and low income. Both Yang and colleagues (2021) and Hawkley and colleagues (2021) develop the notion of the “clustering of risk” with loneliness not happening in a vacuum, but alongside other adversities which may or may not be life stage specific.

However, the uniqueness of some stages of development, most notably adolescence and early adulthood, is also important, and three of our papers emphasize the importance of cognitive processes in understanding loneliness in these age groups. Geukens and colleagues (2021) report that fear of negative evaluation by others in social situations and low self-esteem predict the rate of change in loneliness over time (from ages 12 to 13 years). Pearce and colleagues (2021) report that only those aged 25–34 underperformed on social tasks, choking under pressure, potentially because of their overwhelming need for social connections.

A key tenant of loneliness research is that loneliness cannot be attributed to individuals by external observers. However, Matthews and colleagues (2021) offer an intriguing finding that strangers can correctly identify young people as lonely. They hypothesize that loneliness makes people uncomfortable in their skin during social interaction. This uneasiness can be detected by their interaction partners and have a negative impact on that relationship. The association between higher loneliness and lower relationship quality as reported by one’s romantic-sexual partner in the study by Mund and colleagues (2021) seems to corroborate that presumed underlying process.

The set of papers in our special issue offer a unique insight into loneliness across the life span. At the same time, they also serve to

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highlight areas for further research. We suggest there is a need for more interdisciplinary research and collections of papers that explore loneliness. This enables exploration of how loneliness may differentially affect people at different developmental stages and can highlight the universality and unique features of loneliness across the life course and at specific life stages. The papers in this special issue are largely focused on individual factors, with the exception of Mund and colleagues (2021), who remind us that people function in dyads and groups and influence each other during social interaction. Moving forward, we suggest that there is a need to move beyond individuals and dyads to look at how the wider community, both physical and social, can influence the experience of loneliness. For certain population groups, notably children and adolescents, the very old and those living in specific settings such as prisons, care homes, and supported housing, our evidence relating to prevalence and predictors is less well established. Two further aspects of our evidence base would benefit from further exploration: there is a significant need to develop our portfolio of longitudinal studies to (1) enable us to determine predictors of changes in loneliness (both positive and negative) and (2) develop our understanding of what distinguishes chronic from transient loneliness and how those may vary across the life course. Such evidence is essential for the development of interventions to prevent or mitigate loneliness and the development of robust public policy.

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