A social science approach to addressing loneliness and mental health: can a social network approach help?

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How can a Social science approach / agenda inform interventions or approaches to tackling

Very broad

• **Who does it impact and in what circumstances?** (How, why to what extent) Circumstances are social to what extent? What are the circumstances of social isolation, how does it occur?

• **Loneliness – social origins** (Epidemic or Moral panic)

• **Policy/economic analysis** – to what extent are the changes in provision which deliberately and inadvertently promote sociability relate to circumstances promoting loneliness?

• **Sociological commentary** wary of medicalisation – mystification – but also conflation with mental health
Societal Origins/ Diagnosis

• Loneliness constitutes an embedded social structural feature of contemporary life-

• Dislocation - Loosened or a decline in the quality of social bonds, alienation - existential crises

• Contemporary Culture Urbanisation Loneliness “nightmare” versus Solitude “though alone I am together with somebody (myself” that is”....Hannah Arendt
Key messages from PHE from the evidence about social isolation point to need to consider social science as central approach.
Social network approach aligned to diagnosis of the problem

• Quality & quantity of social relationships affect mental health.
• Links between health and social inequality & social isolation
• Individual & community level factors that impact on social isolation are nested in the wider social, economic, political and cultural context.
• A range of resources provided by the public, private, & community and voluntary sector may have potential to impact on social isolation.
• Importance of involving communities in the design of interventions and the way they are managed & implemented.
• Many community based interventions intended to reduce social isolation will not be identified as such within the community they serve but focused on shared activities bringing people together naturally in a way that is appropriate to their particular needs.
• Successful interventions to tackle social isolation reduce the burden on health and social care services.
Social network approach

- Social structure made up of social actors, their interaction & ties – connect to resources
- Full network – describe whole network system
- Ego-Centred – focus on the structure of ties surrounding individuals (mental health)
- Social Support: perceived state and availability of individuals' relationships
- Social Captital – focus on the positive thing that flow along network ties (trust, solidarity)
Social Network Analysis Approach & Social Structure

• Examination of network dynamics relationships & resources
• People’s happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected – happiness as a collective phenomena (Understanding mental health) Christakis & Fowler
  https://www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.a2338
• Resources +Ties +Mental Health & Loneliness Emotional support relationships are a more powerful protector of cognitive decline than instrumental support relationships. (Ellward et al 2013)
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How do people with long-term mental health problems negotiate relationships with network members at times of crisis?

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Abstract

Background
Social network processes impact on the genesis and management of mental health problems. There is currently less understanding of the way people negotiate networked relationships in times of crisis compared to how they manage at other times.

Objective
This paper explores the patterns and nature of personal network involvement at times of crises and how these may differ from day-to-day networks of recovery and maintenance.

Method
Semi-structured interviews with 25 participants with a diagnosis of long-term mental health (MH) problems drawn from recovery settings in the south of England. Interviews centred on personal network mapping of members and resources providing support. The mapping interviews explored the work of network members and changes in times of crisis. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a framework analysis.

Results
Three key themes were identified: the fluidity of network relationality between crisis and recovery; isolation as a means of crises management; leaning towards peer support. Personal network input retreated at times of crisis often as result of "ejection" from the network by participants who used self-isolation as a personal management strategy in an attempt to deal with crises. Peer support is considered useful during a crisis, whilst the role of services was viewed with some ambiguity.

Conclusions
Social networks membership, and type and depth of involvement, is subject to change between times of crisis and everyday support. This has implications for managing mental health in terms of engaging with network support differently in times of crises versus recovery and everyday living.
The changing nature of networks from day-to-day to crisis is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 - Day-to-day example network

Figure 2 - Crisis example network (same participant)
Align network intervention with hints about what might help

• Find distraction activities.....
• Look for good in people you meet (promotion of trust)
• Join a social club or take up new social activities (BBCR4)
• Social interventions – ability to intervene and make a difference
Network capacity for addressing loneliness

- **Capabilities Approach** (Sen 1992) - a practical choice, "to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value“ Wellbeing, people do what they have reason to value (Sen, 1992).
- consistent with relational understandings of autonomy recognize that who we as individuals are able to be, and how we are able to contribute to that for ourselves, depend on our social situations and relationships, as well as on the resources and skills that we might claim for Entwistle (2012)
- **Affiliation**: live with and toward others to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction (connectivity)
- **Relationships** represent sources of support, access to resources (as well as conflict and demand)
- **Relations and interdependency** between social actors can help situate wider contextual influence management
Social Network Online Intervention

Steps

Map personal community of support in circle diagram with a facilitator

Complete on-line preference questionnaire

Link interests to database and Google map of local activities and resources
The resources of networks that matter

• Who the members: partners, family, professionals, weak ties (friends&neighbours) groups, pets.

• The diversity of groups, activities things and activities you value in your network

• Accessibility, place and proximity

• Navigation, Negotiation & Collective Efficacy

• Community & Voluntary groups
“We have two kinds of loneliness. One which Frieda Fromm-Reichmann calls ordinary loneliness, a missing of others which is felt as such and thus presupposes the capacity for connectedness. And the other which involves the incapacity for connectedness and thus a missing of others which is so profound that the other, even in its absence, is not even understood or felt as such. —Elizabeth Hegeman (1959, p. 365)”