

# *Lonely Porcupines: The Complicated Relationship between Loneliness & Social Engagement*

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# Outline

- How does loneliness relate to **social engagement**?
- How can we best consider loneliness in the **social context**?
- Is this consideration **clinically meaningful** (does it predict important outcomes)?

# Arthur Schopenhauer



*A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter, but, as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse. However, the cold drove them together again, when just the same thing happened. At last, after many turns of huddling and dispersing, they discovered they would be best off by remaining at a little distance from one another. **In the same way the need of society drives the human porcupines together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature** (P 396, Parerga & Paralipomena, 1851).*

# Huddling Models

- Baumeister - Social reconnection Hypothesis (SRH)
- Qualter - Reaffiliation Motive Model (RAM)
- Gardner - Model of Belonging Regulation (MBR)

# Dispersal Models

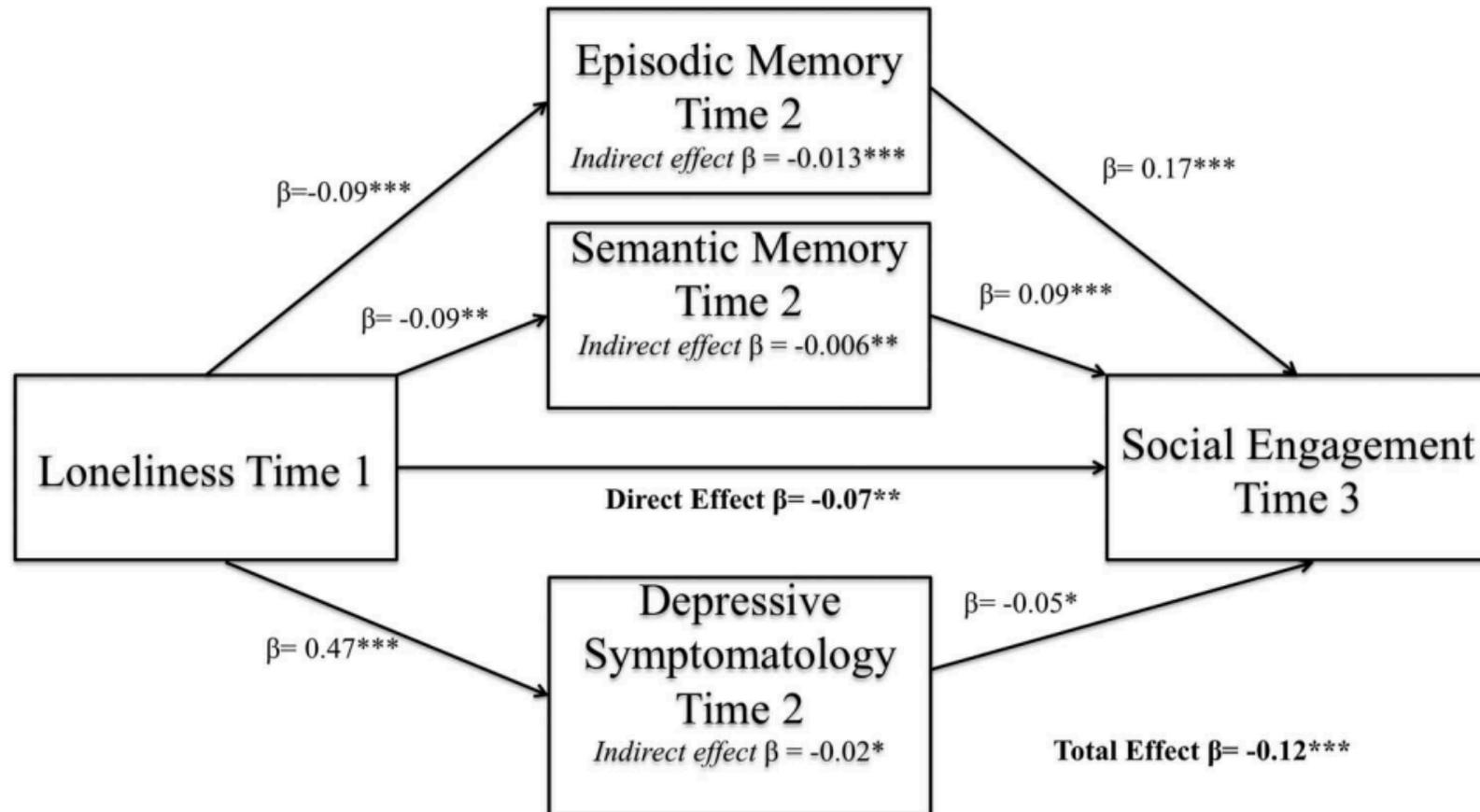
- Short-term, strategic (RAM)
- Long-term, chronic loneliness (RAM, MBR)

*-> does loneliness predict social disengagement over time in older adults?*

# Changes in Loneliness & Social Engagement in ELSA

- N = 4,714 (ELSA, >50) Waves 3,4,5
- Loneliness inversely related to SE ( $r = -0.16, p < .001$ )
- Bidirectional effects over time
- Low loneliness @ t1 -> increase in SE over time
- High loneliness @ t1 -> decrease in SE over time
- High SE @t1 -> decrease in loneliness over time

# Social Engagement, Loneliness, & Memory



# Loneliness in the Social Context

What **discordance** is there between loneliness and social isolation, and is the difference clinically meaningful?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

International Journal of  
Geriatric Psychiatry

**The discrepancy between social isolation and loneliness as a clinically meaningful metric: findings from the Irish and English longitudinal studies of ageing (TILDA and ELSA)**

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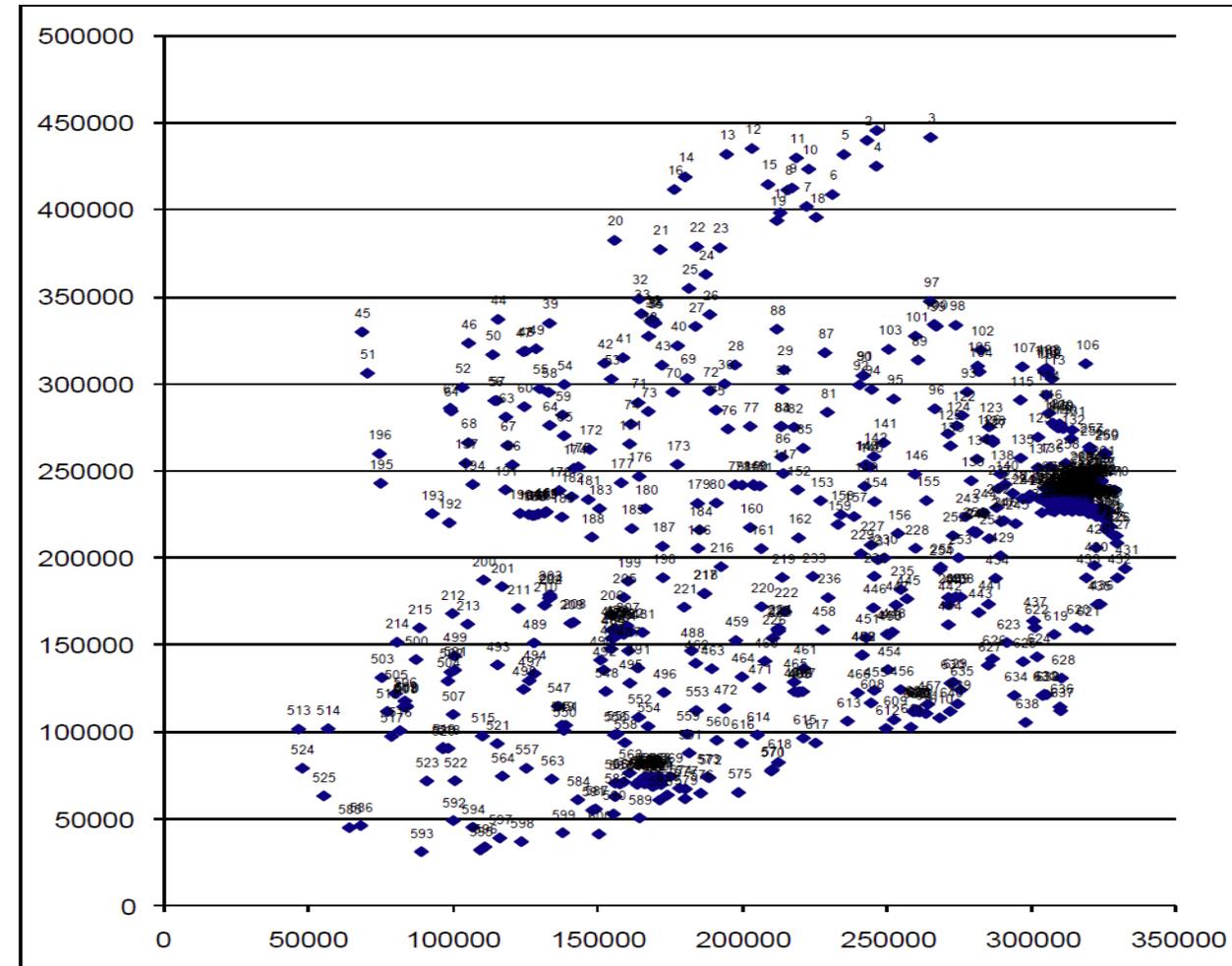
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# The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing: TILDA

- Nationally representative of community dwelling adults
- Longitudinal, prospective cohort design
- Harmonised with HRS & ELSA
- Age: 50+
- Immediate & Delayed Recall (HRS)



# Social Asymmetry

**Discordant: Susceptible to Loneliness**  
High Loneliness  
Low Social Isolation

**Concordant: High Lonely**  
High Loneliness  
High Social Isolation

**Concordant: Low Lonely**  
Low Loneliness  
Low Social Isolation

**Discordant: Robust to Loneliness**  
Low Loneliness  
High Social Isolation

# Cultural Invariance?

Loneliness in context of social isolation is associated with cognitive functioning -> more attention to definition matters!

Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01679-w>

ORIGINAL PAPER



## Comparisons of the discrepancy between loneliness and social isolation across Ireland and Sweden: findings from TILDA and SNAC-K

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# Defining Loneliness



THEORETICAL &  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
PSYCHOLOGY

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## Conceptualizing Loneliness in Health Research: Philosophical and Psychological Ways Forward

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# Some Conclusions

- Evidence for RAM model
- Definition **matters** (Social Asymmetry vs. Loneliness)
- Some evidence shown for mediators but paths are complex & bidirectional

Thanks for your time!



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