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Social Isolation among Single Elderly Persons Living Alone

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the single elderly who are living alone for less than 10 years to more than 20 years, without any family member or relatives. 180 single elderly, age varying from 60 years to 80 years and above, living alone in Chandigarh were selected with the help of snowball method. The single elderly belonged to three different categories, i.e. widowed, divorced, and never married. The number of respondents in each category was 60, i.e. 30 males and 30 females. Interview Schedule was used to collect information. To measure social isolation a scale inspired by Lubben et al., (2006) Social Network Scale (LSNS) consisting of 14 statements was constructed. It was found that most of the respondents felt moderate isolation (49.4%), and no significant difference in the feeling of isolation was found in widowed, divorced, and never married subjects. Age also does not play its role in social isolation, but a significant difference in social isolation was found in the elderly belonging to different social classes. The majority of respondents (49.1%) belonging to the lower social class felt completely isolated. Similarly, the majority of respondents (85.7%) having non-cordial relations with children reported complete

isolation. A significant difference was also found between social isolation and the duration of living alone of the respondents.

Keywords: Social Isolation, Single, Elderly, Living alone.

In today's world, individuals are becoming more self-centered. Due to urbanization, migration in most of the places, the elderly are left behind by their children. The traditional system of joint family in India is also showing remarkable changes in its structure and functions. While living alone elderly persons face different types of challenges in their day-to-day activities. Social isolation thus emerges as an important issue as the elderly lack adequate support and care which they need in old age.

The problem of the single elderly persons in India is assuming a new dimension because of the changing age pyramids, value system and withdrawal of family support system, and migration of children in search of a job, etc. forcing these elderly persons to be on their own. It is argued that an increasing number of elderly may be at risk of being socially isolated. This may be due to several factors such as the increased likelihood of living alone, death of family members or friends, retirement, or poor health.

According to Cohen and Syme (1985), "Social isolation can be defined structurally as the absence of social interactions, contacts, and relationships with family and friends, with neighbours on an individual level, and with 'society at large on a broader level" (p. 247). Day (1992) has defined it as "The absence of satisfying relationships and a low level of involvement in community life" (p. 7). According to Gardner *et al.*, (1998) "An elderly is said to be socially isolated if they experience low levels of social participation and social activity" (p 6).

Elderly persons with many losses to physical and psychological health, social roles, mobility, economic status, and physical living arrangement can contribute to decreasing social networks which also increase social isolation (Creecy *et al.*, 1985; Ryan and Patterson, 1987; Victor *et al.*, 2002; Howat *et al.*, 2004). According to Fowles and Greenberg (2003), in the next two decades, social isolation will become a more concerning issue because the number of elderly persons is expected to increase. According to Delisle (2005), social isolation occurs on three levels, at the micro (individual level), the meso

(community level), and the macro-level (level of greater society). Social isolation can be experienced by individuals in four typical ways: (a) in comparison with their contemporaries, (b) in comparison with younger people, (c) in comparison with themselves at a younger age, or (d) in comparison with earlier generations of older people (Townsend, 1968). Townsend (1957) identified 3 per cent of those over 65 as being extremely isolated and 29 per cent as partly isolated.

According to Agewell Foundation (2010), elderly persons in the age group of 80 years and above face more isolation in comparison to elderly persons in the younger age groups of the elderly. Gender, widowhood or divorce, culture, education, income, and health have all been found to influence the experience of social isolation (Adams *et al.*, 1976; De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 1995; Mullins *et al.*, 1996). According to Gardner *et al.*, (1998) elderly males were much more likely to be isolated than elderly females. Edelbrock *et al.*, (2001) have also identified being male as a risk factor for social isolation. There are some other factors also which include changes in life events such as retirement and widowhood, living alone, lack of participation in social activities, and transportation problems (Ryan, 1998;; Woodward and Queen, 1988; Hicks, 2000).

Objectives

1. To measure social isolation among single elderly.
2. To find out the relationship between the socioeconomic profile of the single elderly and social isolation.

Method

Sample

180 single elderly, age varying from 60 years to 80 years and above, living alone in Chandigarh were selected with the help of the snowball method. The single elderly belonged to three different categories, i.e. widowed, divorced, and never married. The number of respondents in each category was 60, i.e. 30 males and 30 females.

Tools Used

An elderly person is considered to be socially isolated when he/she perceives a lack of social support, absence of social contacts,

and has independent living arrangements without family and kin around. To measure social isolation, a scale inspired by the Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS) consisting of 14 statements was constructed. An interview Schedule was also used to collect information from the respondents.

The Social Network Scale was administered individually to all the respondents and they were asked to give their views on these statements on a five-point scale ranging from very low to very high. There were 9 positive and 5 negative statements. Depending on the statement the scores of the respondents ranged from 14–70 and quartiles were calculated that were further grouped into three main categories, i.e. complete isolation, moderate isolation, and no isolation. Based on distribution, respondents with a score of 18–32 were included in the complete social isolation, those with a score between 33–47 were included in the moderate level of social isolation, and those who acquired the score between 48–62 were having no isolation.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Distribution showing social isolation of the respondents.

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>Scores</i>	<i>%</i>
Complete isolation	54	30.0
Moderate isolation	89	49.4
No isolation	37	20.6
Total	180	100.0

Table 1 shows that 30 per cent of respondents reported complete isolation. 49.4 per cent of respondents reported a moderate level of isolation and 20.6 per cent of respondents were not found to be isolated in any form. The results of the present study show that a large number of the respondents showed a moderate level of isolation.

Marital Status and Social Isolation

According to Wenger and Burholt (2004), the results show that most of the respondents were not socially isolated (60%). Small proportions were very isolated (6%) a third (34%) were moderately

isolated. According to Kivett (1979), gender is a risk factor to women as being more at risk for isolation than men. An attempt was made to find out which category of single elderly was more socially isolated.

Table 2
Marital status-wise distribution showing social isolation among the respondents

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Never married</i>	<i>Total</i>
Complete isolation	16(26.7%)	26(43.3%)	12(20.0%)	54(30.0%)
Moderate isolation	30(50.0%)	22(36.7%)	37(61.7%)	89(49.4%)
No isolation	14(23.3%)	12(20.0%)	11(18.3%)	37(20.6%)
Total	60(100%)	60(100%)	60(100%)	180(100%)

$\chi^2=11.8$, $df=10$, $p > 0.05$, not significant.

Table 2 shows an association between social isolation and the marital status of the respondents. 30 per cent of respondents showed complete isolation, highest was divorced respondents. 49.4 per cent of respondents showed a moderate level of social isolation and a majority of them were never married respondents. 20.6 per cent of respondents showed no isolation, i.e. they were completely integrated. The more respondents were from the widowed category. The data show that a large number of the respondents showed a moderate level of social isolation. Statistically, there is no significant association between social isolation and the marital status of the respondents. The results don't endorse the findings by Wenger and Burholt (2004) but support the findings of Kivett (1979).

Social Isolation and Age

Ageing process impacts the health of elderly persons and sometimes due to ill health elderly persons have to face isolation. Thus, social isolation increases as the person grows. They have limited access to mobility and social connectivity. The age groups were divided into three main categories, i.e. 60–70 years, 70–80 years, and 80 years and above. An attempt has been made to find out whether the age factor effects social isolation or not.

Table 3
Distribution showing association between social isolation and age of the respondents

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>60–70 years</i>	<i>70–80 years</i>	<i>80+ years</i>	<i>Total</i>
Complete isolation	36(33.6%)	11(22%)	7(30.4%)	54(30%)
Moderate isolation	46(43%)	30(60%)	13(56.5%)	89(49.4%)
No isolation	25(23.4%)	9(18%)	3(13.04%)	37(20.6%)
Total	107(100%)	50(100%)	23(100%)	180(100%)

$\chi^2=5.004$, $df=4$, $p > 0.05$, not significant.

Table 3 shows an association between social isolation and age. 33.6 per cent of respondents were in the age group of 60–70 years followed by 30.4 per cent in the age group of 80 years and above and 22 per cent in the age group of 70–80 years who showed complete isolation. There was 60 per cent were in the age group of 70–80 years followed by 56.5 per cent in the age group of 80 years and above and 43 per cent in the age group of 60–70 per cent who showed a moderate level of isolation. There were 23.4 per cent were in the age group of 60–70 years, 18 per cent in the age group of 70–80 years, and 13.04 per cent were in the age group of 80 years and above who showed no isolation. Results did not indicate very drastic differences in age groups. Results show that most of the respondents who showed complete isolation, were falling in the age group of 60–70 years. The sudden change in life from an active lifestyle to a dormant one might have made them isolated. Similarly more respondents who reported no isolation were from the age group of 60–70 years. Statistically also no significant association was found between social isolation and the age of the respondents.

Social Isolation and Social Class

Studies show that there is a link between social class and social isolation (Massey and Denton, 1993; Steele and Sherman, 1999; Rankin and Quane, 2000; Briggs, 2005; Wilson, 2009; Smith, 2010). Elderly persons from the upper class stay connected with others through different means and technology. According to (Murphy 1982), working-class elderly persons were more likely than others to become isolated. For analysis social classes have been categorized as,

lower, lower-middle, middle, and upper. An attempt has been made to find out the association between social class and social isolation.

Table 4
Distribution showing association between social isolation and social class of the respondents

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>Lower</i>	<i>Lower middle</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Total</i>
Complete isolation	26(49.1%)	10(21.7%)	8(16.3%)	10(28.6%)	54(30%)
Moderate isolation	12(22.6%)	22(47.8%)	36(73.5%)	19(54.3%)	89(49.4%)
No isolation	15(28.3%)	11(23.9%)	5(10.2%)	6(17.1%)	37(20.6%)
Total	53(100%)	46(100%)	49(100%)	35(100%)	180(100%)

$\chi^2=28.5$, $df=6$, $p < 0.05$, significant.

Table 4 shows an association between social isolation and social class background. There were 49.1 per cent respondents belonged to lower-class background followed by 28.6 per cent respondents belonged to the high-class background, 21.7 per cent respondents belonged to the lower-middle-class background and 16.3 per cent belonged to middle-class background who showed complete isolation. There were 73.5 per cent respondents belonged to middle-class background followed by 54.3 per cent from high class, 47.8 per cent from the lower middle class, and 22.6 per cent from lower class who showed a moderate level of isolation. There were 28.3 per cent respondents belonged to lower class background followed by 23.9 per cent respondents belonged to lower middle class, 17.1 per cent respondents belonged to the high-class background and 10.2 per cent respondents belonged to middle-class background who showed no isolation. The results show that more respondents from the lower class background showed complete isolation whereas respondents from other class backgrounds showed a moderate level of isolation. Chi-square value is significant indicating an association between social isolation and the class background of the respondents. The present study supports the findings of Briggs, (2005); Massey and Denton, (1993); Rankin and Quane, (2000); Smith, (2010); Steele and Sherman, (1999); Wilson, (2009).

Social Isolation and Relations with Children

The family institution is changing. So are the relations between elderly parents and children. The elderly are losing their status, power, and prestige. As people age and become less physically and mentally able to meet the standard of productivity and power, they often become marginalized and neglected. Various studies have suggested that the affective bonds with their adult children play an important role in the well-being of elderly parents (Brody, 1970; Cottrell, 1974). Many studies focus on the negative outcomes of conflicting relations between children and their elderly parents (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 1998; Hossain, 2004;). The conflicting relations between the children and elderly persons can attribute to the social isolation for single elderly persons. Keeping in view the above studies an attempt was made to find out the association between social isolation and relations with elderly persons and their children.

Table 5

Distribution showing association between social isolation and relations with the children of the respondents

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>Un-cordial</i>	<i>Normal</i>	<i>Cordial</i>	<i>N.A.*</i>	<i>Total</i>
Complete isolation	12(85.7%)	8(38.1%)	6(11.1%)	28(30.7%)	54(30%)
Moderate isolation	1(7.1%)	8(38.1%)	38(70.4%)	42(46.2%)	89(49.4%)
No isolation	1(7.1%)	5(23.8%)	10(18.5%)	21(23.1%)	37(20.6%)
Total	14(100%)	21(100%)	54(100%)	91(100%)	180(100)

* those respondents who were unmarried and those who didn't have any child were kept in the category of not applicable.

$\chi^2=33.7$, $df=6$, $p < 0.05$, significant.

Table. 5 shows an association between social isolation and relations with children. 85.7 per cent of respondents reported un-cordial relations, followed by 38.1 per cent respondents who reported normal relations, and 11.1 per cent respondents who reported cordial relations with their children showed complete isolation. 70.4 per cent of respondents reported cordial relations followed by 38.1 per cent respondents who reported normal relations and 7.1 per cent respondents who reported un-cordial relations with their children showed a moderate level of isolation. 23.8 per cent of

respondents reported normal relations followed by 18.5 per cent of respondents who reported cordial relations and 7.1 per cent who reported un-cordial relations with their children reported no isolation. Such findings indicate that healthy relations with children integrate the elderly with family and they won't feel isolated. Statistically, there is a highly significant association between social isolation and relations with children of the respondents. The results support the findings by Brody, (1970); Cottrell, (1974), and Johnson and Bursk (1977).

Social Isolation and Duration of Living Alone

Research studies indicate that the longer the duration of staying alone lesser the impact it has on the social isolation of elderly persons. According to HelpAge India (2008) on average, the elderly were living alone for the past 10 years. There were 39 per cent elderly who were living alone for 1–5 years and 23 per cent were staying alone for more than 16 years. For analysis duration of living alone has been categorized as less than 10 years, 10–20 years, and more than 20 years. In the present study, an attempt has been made to find out the association between social isolation and the duration of living alone.

Table 6

Distribution showing association between social isolation and duration of living alone of the respondents

<i>Social isolation</i>	<i>< 10 years</i>	<i>10–20 years</i>	<i>20 > years</i>	<i>Total</i>
Completely isolated	4(13.8%)	18(30%)	32(35.2%)	54(30%)
Moderately isolated	20(69%)	23(38.3%)	46(50.5%)	89(49.4%)
Not isolated	5(17.2%)	19(31.7%)	13(14.3%)	37(20.6%)
Total	29(100%)	60(100%)	91(100%)	180(100%)

$\chi^2 = 12.6$, $df=6$, $p < 0.05$, significant.

Table 6 indicates an association between social isolation duration of living alone of the respondents. Most of the respondents were living alone for more than 20 years. Those who were living alone for more than 20 years showed moderate isolation, i.e. 50.5 per cent, followed by 35.2 per cent with complete isolation and 14.3 per cent with no isolation. Among those who were living alone for 10 to 20 years, 38.3 per cent of respondents had a moderate level of isolation, followed by

31.7 per cent respondents with no isolation and 30 per cent respondents with complete isolation. Similarly, for respondents, who were living alone for less than 10 years, 69 per cent of respondents had a moderate level of isolation, 17.2 per cent respondents had no isolation and 13.8 per cent had complete isolation. It was also found that more respondents in all three categories of duration of living alone were moderately isolated. Results show that as the period of living alone increases isolation enhances. The findings show that the longer the duration of staying alone more impact it has on the social isolation of the single elderly persons. Statistically, there is a significant association between social isolation and the duration of living alone of the respondents.

The results of the present study show that a large number of the respondents felt a moderate level of isolation. There was no significant association between social isolation and the marital status of the respondents. The results were not in line with the findings of Wenger and Burholt, (2004) but coincide with the findings of Kivett, (1979).

The results did not indicate very drastic differences concerning age groups. They revealed that those respondents, who showed complete isolation, the majority of them were in the age group of 60–70 years. A sudden change in the lifestyle from active to sedentary might have made them isolated. Similarly more respondents who reported no isolation were in the age group of 60–70 years. These respondents fall in the category of young aged. They were mobile and didn't face isolation. There was no significant relationship between social isolation and the age of the respondents.

The results revealed that more respondents from the lower class background showed complete isolation as compared to respondents from other class backgrounds that showed a moderate level of isolation. As the majority of these respondents had lived in large families they could not cope with the idea of living alone in old age. For them, family remained the main institution of support.

Conclusion

In the modern era, the issues of single elderly living alone need special attention. The population of elderly living alone is increasing. The vulnerability of single elderly has gone higher due to the

transition in the family structure and individualism. Family no more strongly acts as a support system for the elderly because of the changed value system of the younger generation. The value orientation among the younger generation is more materialism than filial piety. On the other hand, the elderly in India, who have a traditional orientation, have very high investments in the ideals of family. The changing social relations and breakdown of traditional systems are resulting in a more individualistic society leading to the social isolation of the elderly. This social isolation affects the living pattern of the aged. The problem will be aggravated in the future as the system undergoes rapid modernization and transformation. Government interventions are required for this section of the society who has given productive years of their life for the society

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