Loneliness, Individualism, and Urbanization in Europe

Christopher Swader
Lund University, Department of Sociology
loneliness ≠ social isolation
But... self reports →
large cities as „lonely places“
Theory

◆ Classical ideas
Strangers (facelessness)
Division of labor (diminished likeness)
Geographical dispersion, commuting
Segregation
Incidental contact (instrumental facefulness. Being „used.“)
Density, Overstimulation (blasé attitude)
Urban values (useful for the ambitious, instrumental, thin networks)

◆ Klineberg's Going Solo

living alone → not always loneliness
Loneliness research in/from Sweden?

I have a poor overview of this... but there does not seem to be huge amounts of sociological work.

Mostly focuses on loneliness among the elderly, links to depression, widowhood

Centers: Aging Research Center - Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm University, Dalarna University (Falun), Nat. institute for study of aging and later life - Linxöping University, Högskolan i Borås , Umeå University
The Blasé Attitude
What do we know?

- Psychology. Link between loneliness and depression (also in our data)
- Loneliness in Russia: urbanism and individualism. The city determinants of loneliness are different (values matter, but ambivalently)
- These urban and individualist effects need to be more broadly tested
Research Question

Do urbanization (modernization) and individualism (culture) matter, in addition to objective social isolation, in predicting loneliness?
Scientific Contributions

- Highlighting the role of individualism in relation to subjective loneliness outcomes.
- Illustrating the links between such individualism and levels of urbanization.
- Providing insight on the differentiation in loneliness outcomes in Europe. Further studies can look at of reasons for this.
- Motivating further in-depth studies of loneliness as a distinctly sociological phenomenon. Loneliness is arguably even more innately 'sociological' than is happiness.
Hypotheses

Urbanization will predict greater loneliness, but these effects will be usurped by individualism (alone and as an interaction with social isolation).

*Individualism is a mechanism for the urbanism effect.*

But in which direction?

'Social Nature' Hypothesis:

Individualism → self-centric behavior amid social needs → enhanced loneliness

and

Blase Hypothesis:

Individualism → less valuation of social relations → less loneliness

*How might these effects work together?*
Social Nature?

Urban Values

Individualism vs. Collectivism
Instrumental-rational vs. Intrinsic, intuitive values
Careerist vs. family oriented
Friendship vs. Family oriented

Objective Social Isolation

Less social behavior

Partnership/fam status, Friendship types
Social activities

Aging

Socially isolated and lonely
Blase' Attitude?

Objective Social Isolation

Family status, Friendship types Social activities Aging

Filtered by

Urban Values

Individualism vs. Collectivism Instrumental-rational vs. Intrinsic, intuitive values careerist vs. family oriented Friendship vs. Family oriented

Sociality matters less

Socially isolated, but not lonely
Methods

- 29 countries, 50435 individuals
- Multi-level logistic regression model
Key Operationalizations

- Loneliness: 2 versions, acute (most of the time or more) and **mild** (ever felt lonely past week)
- Social isolation: 3: with how many people intimate discussions, amount of social meetings, household size
- Individualism: Important to make own decisions and be free, L2 mean
- Urbanization: L2 % living in city, L1 settlement size of respondent
MOSTLY felt lonely past week (psychological)

Red: post-socialist
EVER felt lonely in past week (sociological)

Red: post-socialist

Denmark
Norway
Slovenia
Finland
Iceland
Switzerland
Germany
Sweden
Poland
Israël
Belgium
United Kingdom
Ireland
Spain
Portugal
Cyprus
Total
Estonia
France
Italy
Hungary
Bulgaria
Czech Republic
Slovakia
Albania
Kosovo
Russia
Lithuania
Ukraine
The graph shows a scatter plot of countries with points labeled by country type (PC, OECD, OTH). The x-axis represents the percentage of urban population, while the y-axis represents a measure denoted as AGLonelywide_mean. The regression line has an R² Linear value of 0.219.
A graph showing the relationship between the importance of being free and making one's own decisions and a measure labeled 'AGlonlywide_mean.' Points are color-coded and labeled with country names such as Ukraine, Lithuania, Bulgaria, among others. The graph includes a trend line with an $R^2$ value of 0.235 for the linear relationship.
Main Model (#5)

Models:
1. socio-demographics
2. social isolation
3. individualism
4. interactions
5. country-types

Controls: religious attendance, age, gender

Social Position: Non-married/non-living together, fewer children, Migrant, Employment status, income, retiree

Individualism-collectivism
Urbanization
Social Isolation
Settlement size
Country Type

Loneliness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>S.E</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>S.E</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fixed Part</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Big city X Country urbanization (cent. 73%)</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cons</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.231</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>Age (ce. 48) X Country Individualism</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age centered 48</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>Household members (Add.) X Individualism</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>Household members (Add.) X Country Individualism</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (0-3)</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>Post-Communist (vs OECD)</td>
<td>0.387</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minority</td>
<td>0.294</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>Other country</td>
<td>1.265</td>
<td>0.445</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed, active</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>Post-Communist X Individualism</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed, inactive</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>Other country X Individualism</td>
<td>-0.267</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (0-4)</td>
<td>-0.357</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>Widow (vs. Married or living together)</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow (vs. Married or living together)</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>Religious attend (0-6)</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious attend (0-6)</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>Big city</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big city</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>Country's urbanization, centered 73%</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country's urbanization, centered 73%</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>-0.096</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>-0.096</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>discuss personal matters (0-6)</td>
<td>-0.128</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discuss personal matters (0-6)</td>
<td>-0.128</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>meeting people (0-6)</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting people (0-6)</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>household members, additional</td>
<td>-0.921</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>household members, additional</td>
<td>-0.921</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>Individualism, importance of being free (0-5)</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism, importance of being free (0-5)</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>Country Individualism</td>
<td>-0.549</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Individualism</td>
<td>-0.549</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>Random Part</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random Part</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Level: entry</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level: entry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cons/cons</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What matters?

- **Income** reduces loneliness perception. (purchase of contact, mobility?)
- **Unemployed** are more lonely
- **Bad Health** ↔ loneliness (Strong effect)
- **Living with partner** < never married, not living with partner < divorced < widowed
- **Minorities** are moderately more lonely
- **Social interaction** is huge. Having more people to discuss intimate/personal matters with is most important. Social meetings matter a bit less.
- **Household members** substantially diminish loneliness for everyone. But the return is a bit less if you are an individualist, and somewhat less if you live in an individualist society.
- Being an **individualist** has a big effect → less loneliness.
- Living in an **individualist society** also seems to reduce loneliness. Older people benefit a huge amount (in terms of less loneliness outcomes) from living in such societies (social support and opportunities for the elderly?). Post-communist also get a larger anti-loneliness bonus from being individualists.
- Overall Post-communists are still more lonely than those in the OECD (about twice as much)
What matters less?

- Women are more lonely, but this effect is slight.
- Unemployed are more lonely, but effect is smaller for those actively searching for work.
- Religious attendance ↔ loneliness (Slight effect)
- Retired ↔ less lonely (slight effect)
To Conclude

◆ Individualism diminishes loneliness somewhat, but the effect is additive. It does not cancel out objective social isolation.
◆ «big city» effects remain at both levels, but they are slight (individualism explains them away)
◆ Optimistic accounts of individualization, do not take social isolation seriously enough (Klineberg... household size by far most powerful predictor)
◆ A large unexplained post-communist effect remains. (demoralization, nihilism, ideological collapse? Social trust?)
◆ We don't know about hobbies, civic membership, internet usage
◆ There are limits to individualism. Social integration's effect is stronger. Qual contact matters most, for everyone. The tension between individualism and social isolation will likely remain.
Next Steps

- Connected to longer-term ethnographic study, NYC-Moscow, Tokyo, European Capitals?
- Panel study?
- Other Loneliness researchers?
Comments, suggestions, Questions?