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Descriptive Finding

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Thijs van den Broek

Emily Grundy

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Loneliness among Polish migrants in the Netherlands: The impact of presence and location of partners and offspring

Thijs van den Broek¹

Emily Grundy²

Abstract

BACKGROUND

Research using nonmigrant samples indicates that having a partner and children is protective against loneliness. Such beneficial effects may be weaker for migrants with partners and/or children living in different countries.

OBJECTIVE

We assess how feelings of loneliness among Polish migrants in the Netherlands compare to levels among the general Dutch population and how migrants' feelings of loneliness vary by presence and location of partners and offspring.

METHODS

We used weighted data from the Families of Poles in the Netherlands survey (n=1,129). Wald tests were used to compare levels of loneliness among Polish migrants with scores reported in a different study for the general Dutch population. Linear regression was used to estimate how presence and location of partners and children were associated with loneliness.

RESULTS

Polish migrants in the Netherlands were lonelier than the general Dutch population. Among men, those who had been in the Netherlands for longer were lonelier than those who had more recently arrived. Unpartnered men and men with a partner living abroad were lonelier than men with a partner living in the Netherlands. For women, no effects of presence and location of a partner were found. Presence and location of children made little difference.

CONCLUSIONS

Although loneliness is often considered a problem for older individuals, feelings of loneliness are also strong among working-age Polish migrants. Consistent with studies

¹ London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. E-Mail: m.p.van-den-broek@lse.ac.uk.

² University of Essex and London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

on nonmigrant samples, we found that men with a partner were less lonely than unpartnered men, but only when the partner also resided in the Netherlands.

1. Introduction

Loneliness is the negative, subjective experience of a discrepancy between the desired and the achieved network of social relationships (De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006). It is a known risk factor for poor health and mortality (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010). More than four decades ago, Weiss (1973: 16) identified individuals “who have entered into a new community” as a group living in conditions likely to give rise to loneliness. Migrants may have a particular need for a supportive network of social relationships to help cope with the stress of having to adapt to new, often largely unknown, and challenging conditions, but migration is likely to disrupt existing networks. This mismatch between needs for and availability of a supportive network may lead to loneliness.

The current study focuses on Polish migrants in the Netherlands. Between 2004, when Poland joined the European Union, and 2015, the number of people of Polish origin in the Netherlands increased from less than 40,000 to 150,000 (Statistics Netherlands 2016). Poles are today the second largest group of migrants of European origin in the Netherlands after Germans (*ibid.*). Poland and the Netherlands differ greatly with regard to family culture. Poland is one of the most conservative and the Netherlands one of the least conservative countries in Europe with regard to family norms (Jappens and Van Bavel 2012). Language differences are also significant, with Dutch being a Germanic and Polish a Slavic language. Recent studies have linked language differences and cultural differences between the host country and the country of origin to raised levels of migrant loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, Van der Pas, and Keating 2015; Wu and Penning 2015). We may thus expect substantial loneliness among Polish migrants in the Netherlands.

We use recent data from a population sample of Polish migrants in the Netherlands to assess (1) how feelings of loneliness among Polish migrants compare to those among the general Dutch population and (2) whether they vary by presence and location of partners and children. Studies of nonmigrant samples have shown that having a partner and, to a lesser extent, having children are associated with lower levels of loneliness (e.g., Fernández-Alonso et al. 2017; Hansen, Slagsvold, and Moum 2009; Van den Broek 2017; Victor and Yang 2012). However, migration may lead to separation from spouses, partners, or close family and this in itself may lead to loneliness (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. 2014; Ornelas et al. 2009; Silver 2014). Partnered Polish migrants in the

Netherlands typically have partners who also live in the Netherlands, but a substantial minority have partners living abroad (Dagevos 2011). In transnational relationships, partners have fewer opportunities to support each other, and partnered people who do not list their partner as the most important source of support in their personal network of social relations are known to have strong feelings of loneliness (Van Tilburg 1988, as cited in De Jong Gierveld et al. 2006). Similarly, distance between parents and children may hamper opportunities for the mutual exchange of support (Hogerbrugge and Komter 2012) and be detrimental to the quality of the relationship (Bengtson and Roberts 1991). Poor-quality relationships with children are, in turn, associated with loneliness among parents (Koropeckyj-Cox 2002).

2. Data

Our data is from the Families of Poles in the Netherlands (FPN) survey (Karpinska et al. 2016). In the Netherlands, newcomers with the intention of staying longer than four months are required to register in the municipality where they reside. For the FPN survey, a sample of Polish-born adults who had at least one Polish parent, had registered for the first time between January 2004 and August 2014, and were between 18 and 49 years old at the time of the most recent registration (which may have been up to ten years before data collection) was drawn from the combined population registers. Data collection took place between October 2014 and April 2015. Two modes of data collection were used: a web survey (76.4%) and computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI, 23.6%). The response rate was 51.5%. Data was weighted to adjust for systematic nonresponse. For more information about data collection, nonresponse, and weights in the FPN survey, we refer to Karpinska et al. (2016). After exclusion of two respondents with a reported age below 18, a final sample of 1,129 respondents remained.

3. Measures

Loneliness was measured with the shortened version of the De Jong Gierveld scale (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2006). This validated scale (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2010) produces scores ranging from 0 ('not lonely') to 6 ('intensely lonely'). Presence and location of partners were captured with a categorical variable distinguishing between (1) those with a partner in the Netherlands, (2) those with a partner not living in the Netherlands, and (3) those with no partner. A second explanatory variable captured the presence and location of children. We distinguished

between (1) those having children living in the Netherlands but no children living abroad, (2) those having children living abroad but no children in the Netherlands, (3) those having children living in the Netherlands and children living abroad, and (4) those who were childless.

We controlled for factors shown in previous studies to be associated with loneliness, such as age group, level of education, health status, financial strain, and religiosity (Ciobanu and Fokkema 2017; Routasalo and Pitkala 2003; Yang and Victor 2011). We also included indicators of length of residence, proficiency in the Dutch language, and employment status, as these are likely to be associated with extent of integration and so may also be associated with loneliness.

Respondents were aged between 20 and 58 years old at the time of the interview. We distinguished between (1) those up to 30 years old, (2) those between 31 and 40 years old, and (3) those older than 40. A dummy variable captured whether or not respondents were employed. Education was coded in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-97). We distinguished between low (ISCED 0–2), intermediate (ISCED 3–4), and high (ISCED 5–6) educational attainment.

Health status was captured with a dummy variable indicating whether or not respondents rated their own health as less than good rather than as good or very good. Financial strain was measured with a dummy variable indicating whether or not respondents reported that their household (in the Netherlands) had at least some difficulty making ends meet financially. Length of residence in the Netherlands was classified into three categories: (1) less than three years, (2) between three and six years, and (3) seven years or more. Respondents were asked the extent to which they could (a) understand, (b) speak, (c) read, and (d) write Dutch, with the five-category response scale for each of the four elements ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘very well.’ We calculated the scores on the items into a highly consistent scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.94$) ranging from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating greater Dutch-language proficiency. Finally, we derived a variable to capture respondents’ religiosity. We distinguished between (1) respondents who were non-religious, (2) religious respondents who attended religious services less than monthly, and (3) religious respondents who attended religious services at least once a month. Respondents who reported adhering to a religious denomination were almost exclusively Roman Catholic.

4. Method

We conducted Wald tests to compare the loneliness of Polish migrants with the scores for the general Dutch population reported by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2010). F-tests were conducted to assess whether loneliness varied by presence and location of partners and of children. We used ordinary least squares regression to estimate how the presence and location of partners and children were associated with loneliness after adjusting for a range of sociodemographic characteristics. Given that antecedents of loneliness are known to vary by gender (Dahlberg et al. 2015; Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld 2004; Van den Broek 2017), we estimated separate models for women and men and subsequently tested whether coefficient estimates differed between the two by estimating a pooled model in which every term in the model was interacted with a gender dummy.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. Average loneliness scores were similar for women and men. The overall mean loneliness score ($m = 2.6$) was significantly higher than the mean scores reported by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2010) for the 18–59 age group ($F(1, 1128) = 287.4, p < .001$) and the 60–79 age group ($F(1, 1128) = 121.7, p < .001$) in the general Dutch population.

Figure 1 shows that loneliness scores varied considerably by presence and location of partner. On average, unpartnered women were less lonely than women with a partner, regardless of whether the partner was living in the Netherlands or not. Men were also considerably less lonely when a partner was present, but not when the partner was living abroad. The variation by presence and location of partner was significant for women ($F(2, 672) = 3.1, p < .05$), as well as for men ($F(2, 451) = 14.5, p < .001$).

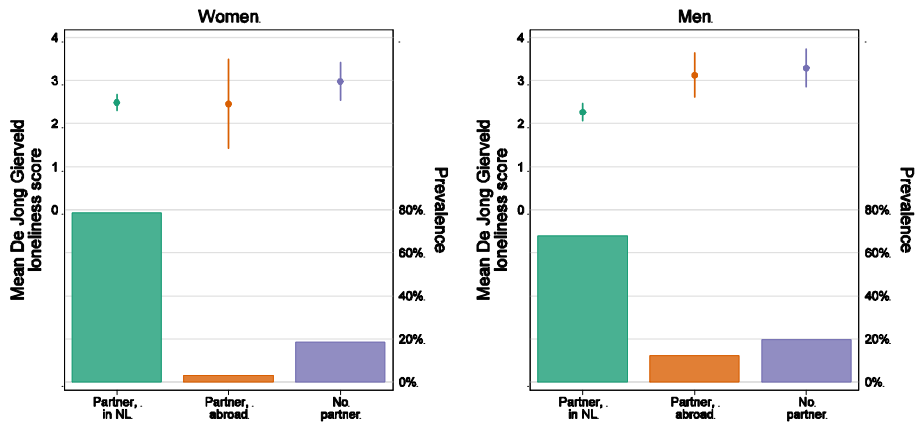
Loneliness scores also varied by presence and location of children, as shown in Figure 2. For both women and men, average levels of loneliness appeared high when all children were living abroad and low when respondents had children living in the Netherlands as well as children living abroad. Childless men and women were also relatively lonely. This variation by presence and location of children was significant for women ($F(3, 671) = 2.7, p < .05$), and for men ($F(3, 450) = 4.2, p < .01$).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: Polish migrants aged 20–58 in the Netherlands

Variables	Women	Men
	Mean / Percentage	Mean / Percentage
Mean loneliness	2.6	2.6
(standard deviation)	(2.0)	(1.8)
Partner:		
In the Netherlands	78.6	67.8
Abroad	3.0	12.5
No partner	18.4	19.8
Children:		
In the Netherlands, not abroad	40.2	25.1
Abroad, not in the Netherlands	6.8	18.2
In the Netherlands and abroad	3.9	3.6
No children	49.2	53.1
Age:		
< 31	47.4	33.9
31–40	36.3	46.9
> 40	16.3	19.2
Employed	67.2	90.7
Educational attainment:		
Low (ISCED 0–2)	17.6	37.6
Intermediate (ISCED 3–4)	50.7	48.2
High (ISCED 5–6)	31.7	14.2
Less than good self-rated health	23.0	16.3
Financial difficulty	33.2	29.4
Years in the Netherlands:		
< 3	27.4	18.7
3–6	42.3	43.5
7+	30.3	37.9
Mean Dutch-language proficiency	11.0	10.0
(standard deviation)	(4.5)	(3.8)
Religiosity:		
Not religious	13.8	17.7
Religious, attends service less than monthly	64.4	65.2
Religious, attends service at least monthly	21.8	17.2
Observations	675	454

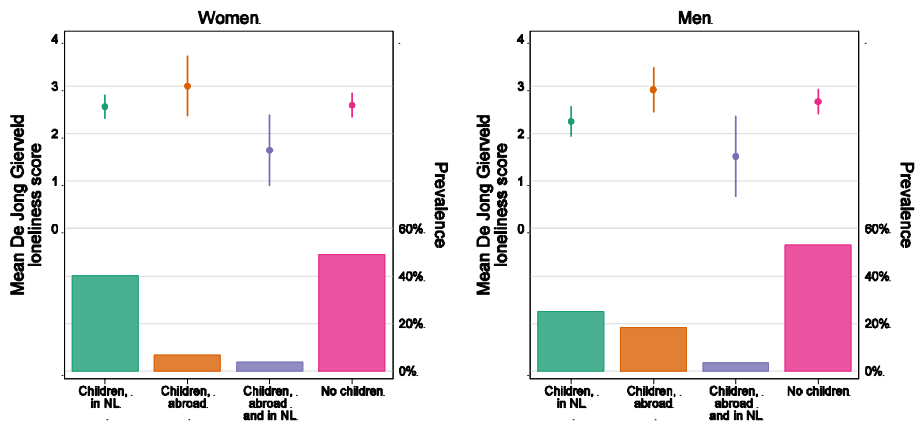
Note: Data is from the Families of Poles in the Netherlands survey, 2014–2015; weighted.

Figure 1: Loneliness by presence and location of partner



Source: The Families of Poles in the Netherlands survey, 2014–2015.

Figure 2: Loneliness by presence and location of children



Source: The Families of Poles in the Netherlands survey, 2014–2015.

Results of the multivariate analyses are presented in Table 2. For women, no association between the presence or location of a partner and loneliness was found. The small group of women with children both in the Netherlands and abroad was less lonely than women with children living in the Netherlands only, women with children abroad but not in the Netherlands ($\Delta b: -1.28, p < .01$), and childless women ($\Delta b: -1.00, p < .05$). Women with less than good self-rated health and those having difficulty making ends meet were lonelier than their counterparts in better health and better financial circumstances. None of the other explanatory variables were significantly associated with loneliness among women.

Men without a partner, and also men with a partner living abroad, were markedly lonelier than their counterparts with a partner who lived in the Netherlands. The association between having a partner abroad as opposed to having a partner living in the Netherlands and loneliness differed significantly between the model for men and the model for women ($\Delta b: 1.13, p < .05$). No differences in loneliness were found between men with children all of whom lived in the Netherlands and any of the other categories (men with children abroad; men with children in the Netherlands and elsewhere; childless men). However, as for women, the small group of men who had children both in the Netherlands and abroad were less lonely than men with children abroad only ($\Delta b: -1.14, p < .05$) and childless men ($\Delta b: -1.16, p < .05$). Again, as was the case for women, less than good self-rated health and financial difficulty were positively associated with loneliness. Furthermore, men who had resided in the Netherlands for less than three years were less lonely than their counterparts who had been living in the country longer. The effect of having stayed in the Netherlands for three to six years ($\Delta b: 0.70, p < .05$) or for seven years or longer ($\Delta b: 0.90, p < .01$) as opposed to less than three years was significantly stronger for men than for women. No significant effects were found for any of the other explanatory variables in our model for men.

Table 2: Results of linear regression models of loneliness among Polish migrants in the Netherlands

Variables	Women		Men	
	b	SE	b	SE
Partner:				
In the Netherlands	Ref.		Ref.	
Abroad	-0.34	(0.43)	0.79*	(0.31)
No partner	0.29	(0.20)	0.76***	(0.23)
Children:				
In the Netherlands, not abroad	Ref.		Ref.	
Abroad, not in the Netherlands	0.32	(0.33)	0.25	(0.32)
In the Netherlands and abroad	-0.96*	(0.42)	-0.89†	(0.48)
No children	0.05	(0.18)	0.27	(0.21)
Age:				
< 31	Ref.		Ref.	
31–40	-0.11	(0.18)	0.09	(0.19)
> 40	-0.34	(0.26)	-0.26	(0.28)
Employed	-0.14	(0.16)	-0.15	(0.30)
Educational attainment:				
Low (ISCED 0–2)	Ref.		Ref.	
Intermediate (ISCED 3–4)	0.07	(0.21)	-0.09	(0.18)
High (ISCED 5–6)	-0.24	(0.24)	0.46†	(0.27)
Less than good self-rated health	1.07***	(0.18)	1.00***	(0.23)
Financial difficulty	0.70***	(0.17)	0.65***	(0.19)
Years in the Netherlands:				
< 3	Ref.		Ref.	
3–6	-0.20	(0.19)	0.50*	(0.23)
7+	-0.35	(0.23)	0.55*	(0.25)
Dutch-language proficiency	-0.00	(0.02)	-0.00	(0.02)
Religiosity:				
Not religious	Ref.		Ref.	
Religious, attends service less than monthly	0.08	(0.22)	0.10	(0.23)
Religious, attends service at least monthly	-0.13	(0.25)	-0.18	(0.29)
Constant	2.47***	(0.37)	1.49**	(0.49)
Observations	675		454	
R-squared	0.14		0.18	

Notes: Data is from the Families of Poles in the Netherlands survey, 2014–2015; weighted. Bold indicates that coefficient estimates differ significantly between men and women ($p < .05$).

† $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

6. Discussion

This study shows that Polish migrants in the Netherlands are on average relatively lonely compared to the general Dutch population. Our finding that feelings of loneliness among a representative group of working-age Polish migrants also exceeded those of the 60–79 age group in the general Dutch population as reported by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2010) is noteworthy, because levels of loneliness tend to be lower in midlife than in old age (Yang and Victor 2011). Although it could be expected that length of residence in the Netherlands might be negatively associated with loneliness, loneliness among male (but not female) Polish migrants was greatest among those who had lived in the Netherlands for longest.

Future research is needed to determine whether the high levels of loneliness among Polish migrants are attributable to the migration experience or to selection. It should be noted that levels of loneliness are high in Eastern European countries (De Jong Gierveld, Dykstra, and Schenk 2012; De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2010; Hansen and Slagsvold 2016; Yang and Victor 2011), and Victor, Burholt, and Martin (2012) have argued that feelings of loneliness among people with a migrant background tend to mirror those of the general population in the country of origin. In the current study we compared feelings of loneliness of Polish migrants only to levels for the general population reported elsewhere. Future research could build on this and assess whether the antecedents of loneliness for Polish migrants differ from those for the nonmigrant Dutch population or for other migrant groups.

Earlier studies have explored the role of socioeconomic status, health, and the experience of discrimination as antecedents of loneliness among persons with a migrant background (e.g., Fokkema and Naderi 2013; Visser and El Fakiri 2016). We extended this research by focusing on the impact of the presence and location of partners and offspring. Having a partner and, to a lesser extent, having children are known to protect against loneliness. The presence of close family is even more strongly linked to psychological well-being for Eastern Europeans than for Western Europeans (Grundy, Van den Broek, and Keenan 2017; Moor and Komter 2012). However, migration may involve separation from partners and children, in which case the beneficial effects of partners and offspring may be weaker. Those separated by migration might even be lonelier as a result of missing their family.

Our results showed that male Polish migrants with a partner were less lonely than their unpartnered counterparts, which is in line with results from earlier research on the general Dutch population (Dykstra and Fokkema 2007). However, having a partner was only protective against loneliness for male Polish migrants when the partner also resided in the Netherlands. No effects of presence and location of a partner were found for female Polish migrants. This gender difference is consistent with previous studies of

nonmigrant samples, which have reported that partnership status is more strongly associated with loneliness for men than for women (Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld 2004; Van den Broek 2017). The finding that working-age male migrants with partners abroad are a group at risk of raised feelings of loneliness may have considerable public health implications, given the rising number of people of Polish origin in the Netherlands and the fact that loneliness is a known predictor of morbidity and mortality.

7. Acknowledgements

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