Consideration of Culture in Late Life Social Connection Research: A Qualitative Meta-analysis

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Background

U.S. adults aged 65 years and older are the fastest growing age group,[1] yet approximately 25-35% of older adults are lonely.[2,3] 1 in 4 older adults identify as a member of an ethnic minority group, and that proportion is projected to increase over the next 20 years.[4] As the population of older adults grows and diversifies, identifying best practices for promoting equitable and healthy aging is of high importance.

Long-term Goals

1. Examine the scope to which cultural and racial diversity have been considered in past social connection intervention research
2. Analyze the role that culture plays in the effectiveness of social connection interventions for older adults
3. Determine culturally-sensitive methods to increase social connection among diverse older adults.

PRISMA Flow Diagram
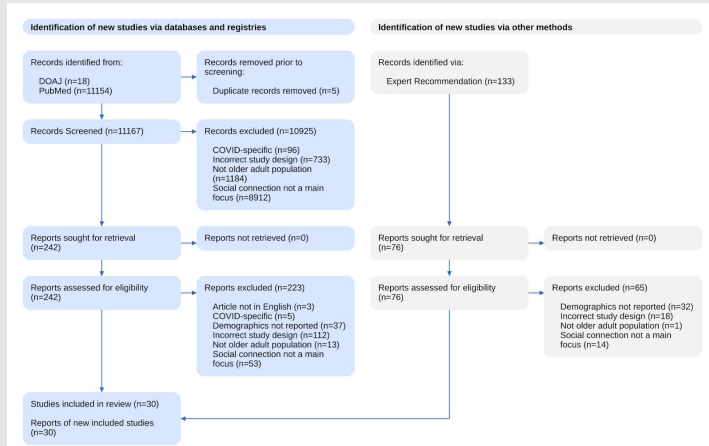
Results
Example of extracted data for each included study (N=30)

Table 1

Characteristics of Studies Included in the Qualitative Meta-analysis (N=30)

Article	Title	Method	Country	Setting	Sample N[a]	Age[b]	% male	Race/ethnicity[c]
Bergman-Evans, 2004	Beyond the basics: Effects of the Eden Alternative model on quality of life issues	intervention	USA	veterans' home, nursing home	21	$M = 76.1$	61.9%	85.7% White, 14.3% non-White
Brown et al., 2004	Indoor gardening older adults: Effects on socialization, activities of daily living, and loneliness	intervention	USA	rural nursing homes	55	$M = 81.5$	14.5%	16.4% Black, 83.6% White
Collins & Benedict, 2006	Evaluation of a community-based health promotion program for the elderly: Lessons from seniors CAN	intervention	USA	senior centers, senior communities	339	Range = 52-93	20%	68% White

Results
Themes & Subthemes

1. Cultural barriers to social connection: Acculturative stress, fearing stigma & prejudice, feeling undeserving or burdensome

2. Cultural social connection: Culture-matched peer support, community and community resources, family

3. The heterogeneous experience of loneliness: Between and within cultures, intersectionality

Methods

Design: Qualitative meta-analysis[6] following PRISMA guidelines
Inclusion criteria: 1) peer-reviewed, 2) original research, 3) older adult sample, 4) social connection is the primary focus of the study
Exclusion criteria: 1) race, age, or ethnicity demographics not reported, 2) study design other than intervention, focus group, or interview, 3) not available in English, or 4) the study was specific to the COVID-19 pandemic
Primary search terms: 1) older adults, 2) social connection
Data extraction: 2+ RAs reviewed and extracted: author(s) and year, title, sample size, study design, country where research was conducted, setting, sample age, gender, and race, consideration of diversity in study design, acknowledgement of diversity in results or discussion, and findings regarding the experience of social connection in late life

Conclusions

"Ethnic diversity can be experienced as dissimilarity, as not belonging, as the opposite of place attachment, when residents perceive it to stand in the way of forming social ties to neighbors."[5]

- There is a need for culturally-tailored interventions, a standardized and better assessment of loneliness that is multidimensional, and diverse research samples. The integration and centering of cultural values in social connection interventions is likely to increase buy-in and efficacy.
- There is a need for policy change; older adults need community support and connection in the absence of support from younger generations. Our aging population is increasing in both size and diversity, community resources should increase at a similar rate.

References

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