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Published online: 08 Feb 2024.

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Loneliness among older ethnic minority people: exploring the role of structural disadvantage and place using a co-research methodology

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ABSTRACT
Limited research exists on the experiences of loneliness among older ethnic minority people. Yet, the ageing population is increasingly diverse and health inequalities are growing. It is therefore important to explore how older ethnic minority people experience loneliness to ensure policies meet their needs. This article examines a sample ($N = 17$) of semi-structured qualitative interviews with older South and East Asian people in Greater Manchester (United Kingdom). Older co-researchers conducted the interviews as part of a larger research study. The findings encompass three themes relating to: expressions of loneliness, life course disadvantage and its impact on loneliness, and the role of ageing in place on loneliness. Reported disadvantages included: a lack of employment and educational opportunities, stress related to migration, and racial and sex discrimination. The findings highlight the consequences of accumulating such disadvantages, as well as the impact of ageing in place, on later experiences of loneliness.

Introduction

Loneliness has been linked to numerous physical and emotional health problems (Smith and Victor 2019), is estimated to affect over a third of the global population (Varrella 2021), and is, therefore, a pressing social issue. While feelings of loneliness can occur at any age, its prevalence follows a non-linear U-shaped distribution with the highest rates reported in young (<25 years) and older (>65) adults (Victor and Yang 2012). The factors that drive loneliness

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differ by life stage, with the heightened risk faced by older adults thought to be related to factors such as retirement, chronic illness, and widowhood (Windle, Francis, and Coomber 2011). Recent research found that the coronavirus pandemic and accompanying stay-at-home measures further increased self-reported loneliness amongst older adults, especially for those living alone (Savage et al. 2021). Further research that used data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) revealed that this risk was highest for individuals aged 50 and over with poor self-reported health and low socioeconomic status (Chatzi and Nazroo 2021). As with most surveys of the general population, the experiences of the most marginalised groups, who may be at greater risk for loneliness, are underrepresented in ELSA. This is particularly an issue for older members of ethnic minority groups who are often neglected in research and policy (Bécares, Kapadia, and Nazroo 2020). Further research on loneliness that includes ethnic minority populations is urgently needed, particularly given that in the United Kingdom (UK) the older ethnic minority population is increasing at a faster rate than the older white population (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2022). Nevertheless, where research has examined loneliness in such groups, it has shown that members of ethnic minority groups are more likely to report feeling lonely (Salway et al. 2020). Theories such as cumulative disadvantage (Dannefer 2003) and minority stress theory (Meyer 2003) posit that ethnic minority individuals accumulate a number of unique stressors, as a consequence of prejudice, discrimination and racism, operating across the life course that negatively impacts their long-term outcomes. For example, ethnic minority people are more likely to age in more deprived communities, which has been linked to worse healthy ageing outcomes than those living in more advantaged areas (Santos, Paciência, and Ribeiro 2022). Yet the interaction between such disadvantages and their impact on loneliness in later life remains underexplored.

The lack of research exploring the role of place and contextual factors in shaping later experiences of loneliness is particularly pertinent given that ethnic minority people are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation where fewer resources and meeting spaces are available (Byrne et al. 2020). Most loneliness research has, so far, focused predominantly upon individual characteristics, such as chronic illness (Barreto et al. 2021). The existing research that has examined contextual factors and the accumulation of social and economic disadvantage (Bécares, Kapadia, and Nazroo 2020; Hayanga, Kneale, and Phoenix 2021) is quantitative in nature, meaning that the processes that link experiences of structural disadvantage and the increased risk of loneliness in later life have not been fully explored. The limited qualitative research on this matter also means that the voices of minoritised groups are largely absent in the literature (Torres 2007), but for the appropriate development of policy there is an urgent need to incorporate the voices of people with ethnic minority identities.

This paper incorporates three recommendations for research: first, the need to include the voices of ethnic minority groups when exploring loneliness, here focusing on older South and East Asian people (Torres 2007); second, a focus on understanding how structural disadvantages contribute to loneliness in later life, acknowledging the impact of being exposed to racial and ethnic discrimination (Stopforth et al. 2021); and third, a focus on how the type of neighbourhoods in which people age can shape experiences of loneliness, which is additionally important in the context of creating more age-friendly policies (Buffel and Phillipson 2023).

The paper first explores the meaning of loneliness including conceptualisations and the social networks of older ethnic minority people. It then discusses the possibility of how cumulative disadvantage theory could help us to explain why some older ethnic minority people may be more at risk of experiencing loneliness. It then explores the potential impact of place in later life on the experiences of loneliness. The article goes on to emphasise the importance of doing research *with* individuals with ethnic minority identities, detailing a qualitative co-research methodology that was adopted to explore experiences of loneliness among older (50+) ethnic minority individuals in Greater Manchester, UK. Interview findings are then presented, encompassing three themes: expressions of loneliness, the link between cumulative disadvantage and loneliness, and the relationship between place and social connections. Finally, the article discusses the novel contributions and implications of this research, including the requirement to acknowledge that experiences of loneliness in later life are linked to structural disadvantages and discrimination, stressing the need to invest in inclusive and diverse "age-friendly" communities.

Background literature

There are three streams of literature informing the background of this paper: (1) conceptualising experiences of loneliness in later life; (2) the social networks and experiences of loneliness among older ethnic minority people; and (3) cumulative disadvantage, belonging, and later life.

Conceptualising experiences of loneliness in later life

Loneliness is most commonly defined as a subjective and unpleasant state that is experienced when an individual lacks certain relationships (De Jong Gierveld, Fokkema, and Van Tilburg 2011). This includes situations in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than one considers desirable, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realised. Social isolation, on the other hand, can be defined as an objective absence or lack of social contact, typically measured in terms of network size and community involvement. While isolation can trigger feelings of

loneliness, it is not synonymous with loneliness as loneliness can be experienced irrespective of the size of one's social network (Durcan and Bell 2015). While social isolation can be desirable to some individuals, loneliness is always a negative and unwanted emotional state; here in this paper, we focus on loneliness.

The social networks of older ethnic minority people: is loneliness a factor?

It is often assumed that older ethnic minority people are protected from loneliness because they are perceived as being more likely to live in multigenerational households with traditional practices whereby younger members care for the older individual (Khan 2017). This stereotyping may stem from the association made between collectivist cultures and ethnic minority groups (Hayanga, Kneale, and Phoenix 2021). In collectivist cultures, individuals often value interdependence and are oriented towards cohesion, commitment, and obligation (Victor, Burholt, and Martin 2012).

Yet such assumptions are problematic as: (1) they assume individuals cannot feel lonely if they have larger social networks, which is not necessarily the case as people can feel lonely despite being surrounded by others (De Jong Gierveld, Fokkema, and Van Tilburg 2011); (2) they ignore heterogeneity within ethnic minority populations who have varied cultural traditions, family structures, and living arrangements, both across and within specific ethnic minority groups (Modood et al. 1997); and (3) they tend to overlook broader factors such as immigration policies, economic mobility/deprivation, and a lack of adequate housing that can erode traditional family structures and practices within minoritised populations (Ahmad and Walker 1997).

Indeed, a recent quantitative study found that Black and Asian older people were more likely to have sparse friendship networks, including being more likely to report having no close friends and no friends who lived locally (Hayanga, Kneale, and Phoenix 2021). This suggests that older Black and Asian people may lack close confidants and have friendship networks that are less geographically accessible than those of White older people. However, while this research illuminates important elements of the circumstances of older ethnic minority individuals, the nature of the data used means that it cannot explore the implications for older ethnic minority people experiencing loneliness.

Much of the existing research on loneliness focuses on White majority populations; yet the limited research on loneliness and older ethnic minority populations demonstrate that such groups may be at an increased risk of loneliness (Salway et al. 2020). One study found that older migrants in the UK who originated from China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Africa, and the Caribbean reported feeling lonely more often compared to their White British counterparts (Victor, Burholt, and Martin 2012). Other research has

highlighted the variation of loneliness rates amongst different older ethnic minority individuals; for example, Victor et al. (2021) surveyed 1206 adults aged 40 + from six minority communities in England and Wales and found that Indian older people reported the lowest levels of loneliness in comparison to African Caribbean, Pakistani, Black African, Bangladeshi people; while Chinese older people reported the highest levels. Furthermore, the risk of experiencing loneliness in later life has been found to further increase amongst new migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. For example, Horn and Fokkema (2023) found that among refugees aged 45 and older who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2016, almost half reported experiencing loneliness. The major contributing factors to their experiences of loneliness included poor health, financial strain, lack of family ties in Germany, limited contact with wider society/native Germans, insecure residence status, and perceived hostility towards them. Further survey research in Canada found that immigrants from countries with a similar language and culture were not lonelier than those born in Canada, while those from countries that differ in native language/culture were significantly lonelier (De Jong Gierveld, Van der Pas, and Keating 2015). This work also demonstrated the importance of the composition of the network of family and friends, and of local participation and feelings of belonging to the Canadian society, in explaining loneliness among older immigrants.

Cumulative disadvantage, place, and later life

Though previous research has linked factors such as feelings of belonging to wider society to loneliness among older ethnic minority individuals, *how* such factors shape loneliness is not yet well-known. Consistent with the theory of minority stress (Meyer 2003), cumulative exposure to racial discrimination and ethnic inequalities has been found to have incremental negative long-term effects on the mental and physical health of ethnic minority people in the UK. For example, Stopforth et al. (2021) found individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups experienced significant and stark ethnic inequalities in limiting long-term illness and self-rated health persistently between 1993 and 2017, and that these inequalities increased with age. Yet there is a gap in our understanding of how the accumulation of ethnic inequalities over time is associated with loneliness in later life. Cumulative disadvantage theory may be a useful framework to aid our understanding of how individuals' experiences of loneliness can be shaped by earlier (dis)advantages (Dannefer 2003). The theory proposes that the effects of inequality accumulate over time, placing ethnic minority individuals at a growing disadvantage. Deficits in factors such as access to housing, education, job opportunities, and good quality health and social care work to amplify existing disadvantage,

while, similarly, advantages at a given point are dependent on previous advantages (Dannefer 2003). Thus, in later life such differences become pronounced; for example, those who start with lower incomes earlier in life often remain in positions of greater economic disadvantage in contrast to those with higher incomes where greater wealth and resources are accrued and secured through pensions, investments, and savings (Crystal, Shea, and Reyes 2017).

The role of place may be particularly important when exploring loneliness in later life among ethnic minority populations for two reasons. First, ageing within deprived neighbourhoods has been linked to experiencing a lack of facilities and social infrastructure, limited access to green and public spaces, poor quality housing, and a lack of perceived or actual safety (Lewis and Buffel 2020). Such factors have been shown to act as barriers to accessing social, economic, and civic opportunities, and quantitative research has demonstrated that over time it can increase the likelihood of experiencing later loneliness, independent of individual-based characteristics (Victor and Pikhartova 2020). This is particularly relevant for ethnic minority people who are significantly more likely to live in urban and more deprived areas. For example, in the UK, ethnic minority people make up 15% of the total population, but account for almost a quarter (22%) of the population living in the most deprived areas (ONS 2022). Second, the neighbourhoods in which many ethnic minority residents live have concentrations of people with a similar ethnic background and therefore may provide opportunities for social support. There is a body of evidence demonstrating how living in areas with higher proportions of people of the same ethnic identity can promote wellbeing by facilitating social support and a sense of belonging – also known as the "ethnic density effect" (Bécares, Nazroo, and Stafford 2009). For example, Chinese immigrants living in more ethnically dense areas of Philadelphia have been found to be less lonely and to have more family support (Tseng et al. 2021). However, research conducted on Russian speakers in Finland found that increased own-group ethnic density was associated with a higher level of loneliness for those with good local language skills, but not among those with weaker language skills (Kemppainen et al. 2023). The authors suggest that some individuals may feel alienated from mainstream society when living in ethnically dense neighbourhoods, causing them to report feeling lonely more often. Thus, the evidence is mixed in relation to how place impacts experiences of loneliness in later life among ethnic minority groups.

This article, which originated from the first author's doctoral thesis (Cotterell 2022), aims to explore individuals' experiences of loneliness including its link with cumulative disadvantage and the impact of place. Having laid out the empirical and theoretical roots of this paper, we will now outline the study design before presenting the thematic findings.

Methodology

Research design and methods

The findings discussed below are based on a cross-sectional study of older ethnic minority people's experiences of loneliness in Greater Manchester (UK). This study adopted a co-research methodology to explore how experiences of disadvantage(s) had shaped loneliness in later life among ethnic minority individuals. Co-research is a participatory approach that enables "the researched" to become "the researcher" by empowering communities to be involved in knowledge creation (Buffel 2019). The research was conducted *with* older people to present an effective means of accessing and voicing the experiences of minoritised groups who are often missed from research and policy discourse (Mey and Van Hoven 2019). The co-researchers were "experts by experience" meaning that they had knowledge of and established trust within their communities.

Approach to data collection

Ten older people, recruited as co-researchers, conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews between January and June 2019, as part of a larger doctoral project exploring loneliness in older people. Co-researchers (aged 50–79 years old) were recruited through a range of community groups. Seven co-researchers were female; three were White British, three were Pakistani, two were Chinese, one was Indian, and another was East-African Asian. The demographics of the co-researchers are presented in Table 1, detailing who conducted the interviews included in this paper (all co-researchers were involved with analysing and/or disseminating the current findings to some extent).

Table 1. Summary of co-researcher demographics.

Co-researcher	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Self-reported health	Educational status	Conducted interviews included in current sample (Y/N)
01	M	68	East African-Asian	Good	University	Y
02	M	71	White British	Excellent	University	N
03	M	65	White British	Fair	Secondary	N
04	F	50	Pakistani	Good	Secondary	Y
05	F	72	Chinese	Good	Primary	Y
06	F	67	Chinese	Good	Secondary	Y
07	F	59	Indian	Good	University	Y
08	F	79	White British	Fair	Secondary	N
09	F	65	Pakistani	Good	Secondary	Y
10	F	58	Pakistani	Good	Secondary	Y

Prior to conducting interviews, co-researchers completed three mandatory interactive training sessions covering ethical research practices, safeguarding, and qualitative interviewing techniques. Co-researchers received a £10 gift voucher for each interview conducted. The inclusion criteria for interviewees were: individuals aged 50 + who lived independently in Greater Manchester. There was a focus on interviewing older people with ethnic minority identities given the interest in exploring the links with cumulative disadvantage and place. In addition, co-researchers were from varied ethnic backgrounds and so had existing interests and contacts within their own ethnic communities (Cotterell and Buffel 2023).

The co-researchers drafted an interview guide, covering details of past experiences, feelings, health, community involvement, and how these had contributed to any feelings of loneliness. Interviews were conducted in semi-public places, for example in private rooms within community centres, and, with consent, were audio-recorded. The first author transcribed interviews conducted in English verbatim. Interviews that were not in English ($N = 8$) were translated and transcribed with support from community group coordinators and an independent translation service. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester. The project used a form of negotiated consent with co-researchers and academics involved in a process of consensus-building around the aim of the research. Group principles such as confidentiality, trust, and empathy were followed throughout. Consent forms and information sheets were signed by co-researchers and interviewees, with pseudonyms being assigned for both groups to ensure anonymity. Individuals held the right to withdraw at any time.

Sampling and interviewees

Co-researchers used convenience sampling and recruited individuals from community groups or who were known to them (not relatives or close friends). Most co-researchers recruited individuals with similar ethnic/gender identities to themselves. It should be noted here that the study was part of a larger doctoral project which involved a total of 31 interviews being conducted. However, given the aims of this paper, only the 17 interviews with South and East Asian individuals will be discussed. The demographics of the included sample can be viewed in Table 2.

Within the sample of 17 interviews, nine individuals identified as Pakistani, four as Indian, two as Chinese, one as Bengali, and one as Iranian. In total, 14 were female, 11 lived alone, and the majority reported being in fair to (very) poor health ($N = 15$). The most common highest level of education was secondary school ($N = 7$) followed by university ($N = 5$), primary school ($N = 4$), and college ($N = 1$).

Table 2. Summary of interviewee demographics included in the current sample.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years lived in neighbourhood	Self-reported health	Who they live with	Educational status
Aisha	F	72	Indian	11	Fair	Alone	Secondary
Aryan	M	83	Iranian	31	Good	Alone	Secondary
Bahaar	F	71	Indian	0.8	Fair	Spouse	Secondary
Chandra	F	83	Indian	40	Fair	Spouse	Secondary
Dorothy	F	68	Chinese	5	Poor	Alone	Primary
Fatima	F	57	Pakistani	12	Poor	Spouse and adult son	College
Hania	F	79	Pakistani	35	Excellent	Adult son	University
Indira	F	79	Indian	15	Fair	Alone	Primary
Laila	F	62	Pakistani	40	Fair	Alone	Primary
Maya	F	65	Pakistani	10	(very) Poor	Spouse	University
Nasreen	F	63	Pakistani	27	(very) Poor	Alone	Secondary
Paula	F	67	Chinese	3.5	Fair	Alone	Primary
Sahid	M	75	British Pakistani	35	Poor	Spouse	Secondary
Soraya	F	66	British Pakistani	5	Poor	Alone	University
Tej	M	74	Bengali	6	Poor	Alone	Secondary
Zainab	F	51	Pakistani	6	Fair	Alone	University
Zarah	F	76	Pakistani	1.5	Fair	Alone	University

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning both within individuals as well as across cases, showcasing the diversity of views collected (Clarke and Braun 2017). Data were manually managed and coded in several team meetings. Three research questions guided the coding sessions including: "how do older people with ethnic minority identities express and experience loneliness in later life?"; "how do structural (dis)advantages, with a focus on discrimination, shape loneliness in later life?"; and "how does the role of neighbourhood and place further shape individuals' experiences of loneliness?". Once data had been coded and mapped to descriptive categories, a series of meetings discussed organising codes into broader themes. The final themes that were agreed upon with the co-researchers guided the analysis for this paper, although for the purpose of this article, data within each theme were read, considered, and revised iteratively.

Findings

Findings broadly encompassed three themes: expressions of loneliness, life course disadvantage and its impact on loneliness, and the role of place on loneliness. These will now be discussed, in turn.

Expressions of loneliness

Loneliness was expressed in various ways by interviewees. Despite all interviewers asking explicitly about experiences of loneliness, many interviewees did not use the word "lonely" and instead spoke about times they were alone or upset. South Asian interviewees held high social expectations, particularly of their adult children. Many spoke about the importance of seeing their children every day in relation to their wellbeing. Indira, a 79-year-old Indian female, had migrated from India several years ago to be with her adult children after losing her husband suddenly:

> I still want to see my children every day and my daughter does do this, most days anyway … I feel alone, if I don't see her as much as I want. [Indira, Female]

Thus, Indira describing how she felt "alone" if she did not see her daughter every day is a clear example of loneliness as Indira's desired social contact is not matching her actual contact and is resulting in negative feelings. It also demonstrates how cultural norms may shape how loneliness is expressed. Indira, in addition to several other South Asian interviewees, described her family and friends as a "*village*" despite not living within walking distance to most of them. Fatima, an unemployed 57-year-old Pakistani female who lived with her husband and arrived in the UK seven years ago unable to speak English, echoed this point:

> The community here is very strong. It's our culture. They [social club for older Asian women] are my saviour. [Fatima, Female]

Members of a local free group aimed at South Asian women aged 50 + had helped Fatima financially as her husband was in precarious employment and both were classified as homeless living in a friend's property. Fatima's expression of loneliness referred to her cultural norms protecting or preventing individuals from feeling lonely due to promoting a more collectivistic community.

Other interviewees did not express loneliness at all; for example, the Chinese interviewees did not report ever feeling lonely despite living alone, having few social interactions, and having no relatives living in the UK. Paula, a 67-year-old Chinese migrant who moved to the UK over 10 years ago, was quick to report that she did not feel lonely because she is Chinese:

> No. I'm not lonely. I'm Chinese. We're not lonely. [Paula, Female]

In a similar fashion, Dorothy, a 68-year-old Chinese woman who lived alone in sheltered accommodation with a high proportion of older Chinese people living there, reported:

> No Chinese people don't get lonely. We look out for one another – that's why.[…] I'm never lonely, I'm just fine. [Dorothy, Female]

Dorothy, when asked what she considered "being lonely" meant, expanded:

> Being lonely is like being all by yourself, with nobody to help you and feeling upset about this. [Dorothy, Female]

This demonstrates that Dorothy understood the negative feelings associated with loneliness but may believe that an individual must be alone and lacking support to feel lonely.

The Chinese co-researchers explained that the Chinese interviewees may have concealed feelings of loneliness due to wanting to avoid feelings of cultural shame – particularly as the interviewer had the same ethnic identity as the interviewee. One co-researcher commented on how the interview was "very difficult" despite it being conducted in their shared native language:

> it was very difficult … she wasn't answering my questions about loneliness. She closed up, and gave me one-word [answers] [...] loneliness is very very shameful in our culture and so I don't think you're gonna get people to speak about it, especially older people who have pride. [Co-researcher 01]

This is consistent with previous research that found that loneliness is considered to be shameful in Chinese culture and therefore often not reported within this population (Lou and Ng 2012). This, however, does not mean older Chinese people do not feel lonely but that they are less likely to express it; thus, making it difficult to explore their experiences of loneliness (Cotterell and Buffel 2023).

In addition, most male interviewees did not openly express loneliness. Sahid, a 75-year-old British Pakistani man, reported being in poor health and lived with his wife who was experiencing deteriorating health. When asked directly about whether he had ever felt lonely, he replied:

> lonely? No. No. I'm never lonely. [Sahid, Male]

The interviewer then proceeded to ask him more about how loneliness could be experienced among older ethnic minority people:

> well, I do not think us men feel lonely, right? I have never. I don't know about other people, so I can't answer this. [Sahid, Male]

The co-researcher, who interviewed Sahid, described him as "*closed and defensive*" in his field notes, especially when probed about loneliness. The same co-researcher interviewed Tej, a 74-year-old man who identified as Bengali, and experienced similar challenges when attempting to discuss loneliness. Tej lived alone in sheltered accommodation, rarely seeing his two adult daughters; yet he did not express any loneliness:

> No. I'm not lonely. When my daughters come to see me, it is the best day. God would not let men be lonely. [Tej, Male]

Aryan, an 83-year-old Iranian male, however, did express loneliness; though he was interviewed by a female co-researcher. Previous research has found that when men interview other men, who are of similar backgrounds to themselves, there can be a struggle for control (Pini 2005). Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) state that: "*to open oneself to interrogation is to put oneself in a vulnerable position, and thus to put one's masculinity further at risk.*" This may be considered a potential consequence of this co-research approach (*see* Section 4).

Impact of life course disadvantage on loneliness

Though not all interviewees spoke about how their life histories had impacted their current experiences of loneliness, several Pakistani women told accounts of how an accumulation of structural disadvantage(s) had led them to feel lonely in later life. The women reported experiencing racial and sex discrimination, migration trauma, homelessness, financial instability, and a lack of employment and educational opportunities throughout their lives, linking their lack of social connections and feelings of belonging with these past disadvantages.

Maya, a 65-year-old refugee who had arrived in the UK from Pakistan ten years ago, told stories of how being a woman living in Pakistan had significantly limited her employment opportunities and therefore she felt "trapped" in an abusive relationship for several decades as she relied on her partner's income for financial stability. This had not only impacted her mental health but her physical health deteriorated following a "stressful" migration to the UK to "start a new life" at the age of 55. Maya's health issues restricted her ability to socially connect with others and despite living with a spouse, she reported feeling lonely often, due to her poor health and lack of disposable income:

> I can't go out even if I tried now … I can't face it most of the time. My walking is getting worse and worse with age. […] Everything is too much money so I can't afford to join groups as I can't work, and never have been allowed or able to … I get lonely, but I'm so very grateful for [name of group for 50+ South Asian women]. [Maya, Female]

The group which Maya referred to here is the same one Fatima attends – it was Maya's only regular social interaction outside of her home.

Laila, a 62-year-old woman who had migrated to the UK from Pakistan in her twenties, reported similar and explained how this had impacted the loneliness she felt now:

> I moved here to have a better life, and I do think it is better but at the same time, it has been difficult for me as a Pakistani woman here – especially since my husband died. […] in Pakistan, I ended school very very young … I don't have a job … I looked after my children and brought them here. My husband

worked and met colleagues. We would see them. But I have always been … by myself I would say, quite isolated? … sometimes lonely. [Laila, Female]

It was clear that Laila's gender and ethnic identity had impacted her loneliness in later life by restricting her opportunities for social interaction throughout her life course. Nasreen, a 63-year-old economic migrant who had lived in England for 43 years and had recently divorced her husband, echoed these experiences, telling us how she had experienced discrimination based on her gender, ethnicity, and age throughout her life – as well as additional stressors such as financial instability, homelessness, and lack of employment opportunities:

As a Pakistani woman, finding work in the UK has been difficult, English isn't my first language and I've had no education … I'm Muslim and wear a hijab, I've health issues, I've struggled lots with money, living, and things like that so I haven't really had any chance to meet friends […] I have my children but they don't see me enough [to stop her feeling lonely]. [Nasreen, Female]

Nasreen's social opportunities had been restricted throughout her life in a similar sense to Laila's and Maya's. Reports of experiencing structural disadvantage and its impact on loneliness were not, however, restricted to female interviewees. Aryan reported how his lack of education and need to start working in his family's restaurant from age 14, as well as his ethnic identity had acted as barriers to making social connections throughout his life:

I didn't even go to school. I'm from a place where you just worked hard for your parents. I worked in their restaurant. In Iran, that's what I did … it made it hard for me even then to make friends my own age, you know? So I'm used to loneliness?. [Aryan, Male]

Aryan had migrated to the UK in his thirties with his family, and currently relied on his two adult daughters to "keep him company" whenever they could visit him in the sheltered accommodation in which he lived. Aryan later reported that he often felt ethnically discriminated against, with the most recent situation being at an older person's social club meeting:

I did attend an event once and I noticed they ostracised me. And I thought why should I come here to sit alone with other people talking with each other but when it comes to me they don't talk? … So I never did go back. [Aryan, Male]

Aryan lamented that other attendees were not like him and felt he did not belong:

I'm not educated at university or anything like them. I feel strange there. [Aryan, Male]

This experience had discouraged Aryan from attending social groups, contributing to his loneliness.

Thus, racial discrimination, and a lack of employment and educational opportunities had restricted individuals' social connections and feelings of belonging. Furthermore, a lack of employment and educational opportunities directly disadvantaged individuals by limiting their income and disposable wealth, meaning their social opportunities were also restricted. For example, the cost of public transport was perceived to be too high by ethnic minority interviewees who were not eligible for free passes, making travel difficult. Nasreen explained how many Pakistani older women, including herself, were not eligible for a free bus pass as they were still too young to qualify for the state pension:

> lots of women like me don't drive, you know, and we can't have the free bus pass that everyone talks about. So how we supposed to travel anywhere? It's just too expensive and not possible for us. [Nasreen, Female]

Thus, the inability to travel and make social connections limited Nasreen's social opportunities, contributing to her loneliness.

The interviews show evidence of how the accumulation of structural disadvantage(s) across individuals' lives such as having a lack of employment opportunities following migration, living in poverty, and experiencing discrimination negatively affected individuals' experiences of loneliness in later life.

Role of place on loneliness

All interviewees with ethnic minority identities lived in more deprived urban neighbourhoods, often in areas of high ethnic density, which impacted their experiences of loneliness in two ways: (1) by creating daily challenges and exclusionary pressures through population turnover and lack of infrastructure; and (2) by promoting agency and allowing individuals to create a sense of belonging and community. These will now be discussed, in turn.

Deprived neighbourhoods and population turnover

All ethnic minority interviewees lived in highly deprived urban areas where there was a high population turnover rate and a lack of reliable, affordable, and accessible infrastructure. Interviewees reported how this had accentuated loneliness by further restricting opportunities for social connection. To illustrate, most interviewees did not own a car and therefore relied on public transport. However, due to public funding cuts some bus routes had been changed or stopped. This made it difficult for some individuals to travel outside of their immediate area, particularly isolating individuals with mobility restrictions. Chandra, an 83-year-old first-generation Indian migrant, reported how she felt lonely because of the local bus route being cut and she was unable to walk to the nearest stop:

The buses have been stopped years ago and now the closest one is a 15-minute walk away, this is too far me because of my legs. I do feel lonely because I can't get anywhere … . [Chandra, Female]

Bahaar, a 71-year-old Indian woman who had struggled to find employment after migrating to the UK several decades ago, also reported how there were limited meeting spaces in her neighbourhood, revealing she felt "disappointed" about the library closing down:

Our library has gone now, and so there's nowhere for us to meet anyway … there's nowhere to go, nothing to do … it's no wonder kids cause trouble, is there. [Bahaar, Female]

Bahaar referenced "kids causing trouble" and when asked more about this, she mentioned that she does not feel safe going outside of her home past 4pm:

I keep myself to myself, you know? I don't go out past 4 because of teenagers hanging on corners. Not safe. … So, even if I had someone to meet, I often wouldn't be able to … unless they were next door!. [Bahaar, Female]

Just like Bahaar, Indira reported similar experiences that had contributed to her experience of loneliness, demonstrating that deprived neighbourhoods with a lack of quality infrastructure can limit social interactions:

there isn't much round here to enjoy for people like me. […] I don't always feel safe when I'm by myself, especially out of my house in the evenings round here now. [Indira, Female]

Population turnover was also reported to be an issue for some interviewees. Bahaar had only lived in her current house for eight months and had moved house numerous times since migrating to the UK decades ago – she reported that she did not know her neighbours well. Aryan had only recently moved into sheltered accommodation; he had lived in a terraced house for over 15 years previously. Yet he mentioned that he did not know his neighbours well because of high turnover:

I said hello to them [neighbours] but that's it, they changed a lot – every year or so? When the rental agreement ended, it would be a new person in there. So I never got the chance to [to get to know his neighbours]. I don't know anybody here, it's [shared hallway] always empty and I never see anyone. [Aryan, Male]

Thus, population turnover stopped Aryan from making new social connections within his immediate community, further contributing to his later loneliness.

Creating a sense of belonging and community
Many interviewees, however, actively sought out a sense of belonging and community, particularly those living in ethnically dense neighbourhoods.

Some interviewees had created strong social connections with neighbours. To illustrate, Soraya, a 66-year-old Pakistani woman who migrated to the UK in her twenties, attended the same social club as Fatima and Maya but also spoke about how her neighbours helped her during difficult times; for example, if she was feeling lonely, she felt comfortable calling round to her neighbours for a chat or making them some food. When asked how she had formed these relationships, she replied:

> Being Pakistani helps as we help each other, you know? I remember moving in and my neighbours brought food round and instantly made me feel at home …
> I suppose … I returned the favour in such, that I then made an effort to go and speak with them and our kids were similar ages and stages, so we took it from there and now, they are like part of my family. [Soraya, Female]

Soraya had found a sense of belonging within her neighbourhood and her Pakistani identity had helped her to do that given the high proportion of other Pakistani people living nearby. This meant that she had numerous social connections nearby and had multiple daily social interactions within her community. Soraya spoke fondly about raising her children within the same neighbourhood in which she lived now.

Aisha, a 72-year-old Indian woman who had migrated to the UK 30 years ago and had always lived in the same neighbourhood, also reported having a strong sense of belonging which was reinforced through the proximity of members of her own ethnic community:

> my community is what keeps me going … the Indian community really do look after one another, you know?" [..] They would never allow me to feel lonely. […]
> my neighbours are Indian and like family. [Aisha, Female]

Aisha reported interacting with her neighbours every day, as well as visiting the temple with them every week, and inviting them to all of her family celebrations. In a similar fashion, Dorothy, a 68-year-old Chinese woman who lived alone in sheltered accommodation and spoke limited English, commented:

> everyone here is Chinese, we speak Chinese, eat Chinese food, go to Chinese shop. It's a home away from China home. [Dorothy, Female]

Dorothy reported that the only time she would leave her immediate neighbourhood was to catch the bus into the city centre to visit the larger Chinese grocery stores. Thus, some individuals actively gained a sense of belonging from living and therefore socialising in ethnically dense areas – making social connections with similar individuals, protecting them from loneliness.

Discussion

To date, there has been limited research exploring experiences of loneliness among ethnically minority individuals in the UK. By adopting a co-research

approach, the current findings highlight the variations in how loneliness is expressed among different ethnicities; for example, some individuals including male (Pakistani/Bengali) interviewees and Chinese women failed to engage with discussions about loneliness and were defensive when asked if they felt lonely. Other research with older men and women from Denmark and China (Lou and Ng 2012: Ren et al. 2022) supports this finding. Thus, the underlying processes suggest it may be an issue for other ethnic minority men and women more broadly and therefore requires further exploration in future research. The way in which disadvantages, accrued across the life course, negatively affected social relationships in later life among ethnic minority individuals was also highlighted; for example, individuals' migration histories, lack of employment opportunities, living in poverty, and experiences of sex and ethnic discrimination had all contributed to individuals' abilities to be socially active in later life. This moves beyond the typical conceptualisation of loneliness, highlighting the cumulative effects of having an ethnic minority identity on loneliness in later life. In addition, the importance of place was highlighted, with findings showcasing how living in deprived neighbourhoods, where access to social infrastructure is limited, can bring further disadvantage to ethnic minority individuals. There was, however, evidence to show how some individuals managed such challenges by creating a sense of belonging and community, particularly when they lived in close proximity to other individuals who shared the same ethnic identity: this is consistent with well-documented research on the "ethnic-density effect" that shows how living in areas with higher proportions of people of the same ethnic identity can promote well-being by facilitating social support (Bécares, Nazroo, and Stafford 2009).

This study addressed three gaps in our knowledge about loneliness in later life. First, it provided a focus on qualitative experiences of loneliness among ethnic minority groups (older South/East Asian people) who are largely neglected in loneliness research and policy discourse (Bécares, Kapadia, and Nazroo 2020). To do this, a co-research approach was used, representing an effective means for accessing and incorporating the views of seldom heard groups of older people who face multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination. In this respect, the study can be viewed as a response to Victor et al.'s (2021) call for gerontologists to develop a research agenda on loneliness that includes ethnic minority older people, and the need for expanding methodological diversity in doing so.

Second, the findings have demonstrated the value of applying cumulative disadvantage theory when exploring experiences of loneliness among ethnic minority groups. The findings highlighted how ethnic minority individuals experience multiple structural disadvantage(s) that accumulate across the life course and later restrict social opportunities and interactions in later life. Structural disadvantages ranged from experiences of ethnic/sex

discrimination to a lack of educational and employment opportunities. This information is critical to improving our understanding of how people become differentiated in later life in terms of loneliness but also other health-related and economic outcomes.

Third, this study adopted a more holistic approach to understanding loneliness by taking the context in which people live into account compared to previous research that has largely focused on individualistic understandings of loneliness. The role of place was found to bring further disadvantage, negatively impacting later experiences of loneliness, with individuals living in deprived neighbourhoods having fewer social opportunities due to a lack of social infrastructure in the area. However, although the neighbourhoods were deprived, they were also ethnically dense which was found to be protective, to some extent, against loneliness as individuals were able to create a sense of belonging and community locally. In particular, Pakistani and Indian interviewees were part of strong and supportive communities that created opportunities for common social bonds. This aligns with research that found that individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds experience less discrimination and more social support in ethnically dense areas (Bécares, Nazroo, and Stafford 2009). Interestingly, however, most interviewees did not report having local family support – unlike in Tseng et al.'s (2021) study. Rather they were supported by neighbours and friends. Furthermore, English language abilities were mixed within interviewees, though almost all interviewees spoke their native language when socialising within their communities. Yet interviewees, like Aryan, did report feeling alienated by mainstream groups which is a finding consistent with Kemppainen et al.'s (2023) study. These findings further emphasise the importance of considering the impact of the broader living environment in exploring experiences of loneliness in later life.

The study points at three implications for policy and practice. First, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to address loneliness in later life, and there is a need to tailor community services and interventions to suit the needs of individuals who may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness, such as minoritised communities. One way forward in this respect would be to increase opportunities that allow for the co-production of policies and services to ensure that they are reflective of diverse experiences of ageing and, particularly, to incorporate the views and experiences of ethnic minority older adults. Second, there is a need to acknowledge that experiences of loneliness in later life are linked to structural disadvantages and experiences of discrimination that accumulate throughout the life course. Rather than considering loneliness as an individual problem in later life, this study makes the case for life-long prevention and attention to the role of structural factors in shaping experiences of loneliness across the life course. Finally, investing in the development of what has been termed "age-friendly" communities, places where

age is not a barrier to living well, to support the social participation of diverse groups of people of all ages should be considered a key strategy in addressing loneliness in old age. This may be urgent in deprived neighbourhoods which often lack the social infrastructure considered to be important to maintain a sense of belonging and identity amongst minoritised older people.

There are several limitations of the research. First, limited minoritised groups were included in this study, and further research is needed to examine the effect of cumulative inequality on loneliness in other groups to account for the heterogeneity of older adults. The findings indicate that researchers may need to adopt different approaches when examining loneliness in different populations; for example, avoiding explicit questions about loneliness within populations who may experience cultural barriers to discussing loneliness. The findings are also largely based on female interviewees, meaning that the gendered aspect of loneliness remains underexplored. Previous studies have indicated that men socialise in different ways compared to women and that challenges around masculinity could mean that men from ethnic minority backgrounds experience structural disadvantage(s) differently (Ratcliffe, Galdas, and Kanaan 2020); thus, future loneliness research should focus on men's experiences, particularly as men have been reported to feel severely lonely more often than women (Lennartsson, Rehnberg, and Dahlberg 2022). Furthermore, there are limitations associated with the co-research methodology, such as the similarities between the co-researchers and their interviewees (e.g. Chinese women recruited and interviewed by other Chinese women). This not only limited the ethnic diversity of the sample, but because of shared cultural understandings, may have led to issues being under-explored during interviews (Buffel 2019). In addition, co-researchers interviewing individuals with similar characteristics to themselves may have unintentionally restricted some individuals' abilities to express loneliness. For example, in Chinese culture, filial piety is an important virtue which defines the obligation of adult children as providing adequate support and care for their older parent (Dong, Zhang, and Chang 2015). If this expectation is not met, individuals can feel a sense of cultural shame; thus, individuals may avoid expressing feelings such as loneliness for this reason. Previous research has also found that the power dynamics between men, when men are interviewing other men, impacts how open to expressing feelings a male interviewee is (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). Future researchers should consider this limitation before adopting a co-research methodology.

Conclusion

The findings contribute to the otherwise sparse literature on older ethnic minority groups whilst adding to the scholarship on loneliness, cumulative

inequality, and the role of place. The paper argues that older South and East Asian individuals experience structural disadvantage(s) throughout the life course which later restricts the social opportunities in later life. This study provides a base for further qualitative research to examine how cumulative inequality shapes loneliness in other minoritised groups. This will enable loneliness to be better addressed in these populations, informing the development of new interventions and changes that may be needed to existing ones.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester on 10/10/2018 (Ref: 2018-4587-7146).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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