

Who is socially excluded in 2010's Europe?

An “asset portfolio” behind friendship in old age

Introduction

Social exclusion happens when people ignore a person, don't speak with him/her or don't acknowledge his/her existence. The opposite of exclusion is acceptance (love, friendship or even veneration). Belonging to a group of people is a vital human need (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008:325). Yet, we live in an age of



competition. Instead of cooperation, the society promotes “independence” and “self-sufficiency.” As a result, loneliness, which is perceived social isolation, was found to be a significant affliction of older people (Shankar, McMunn, Banks & Steptoe, 2011).

While being accepted or loved by others is associated with multiple benefits, the lack of a social network harms person's physical and mental health, worsens cognitive functioning and finally leads to increased mortality (Marmot, 2010; Berkman et al., 2004). Hence, it is important to understand the “mechanisms” of acceptance and of exclusion, i.e. which people are more likely to be accepted and who is at risk of social exclusion.

Theoretical debate: exchange, altruism or social skills?

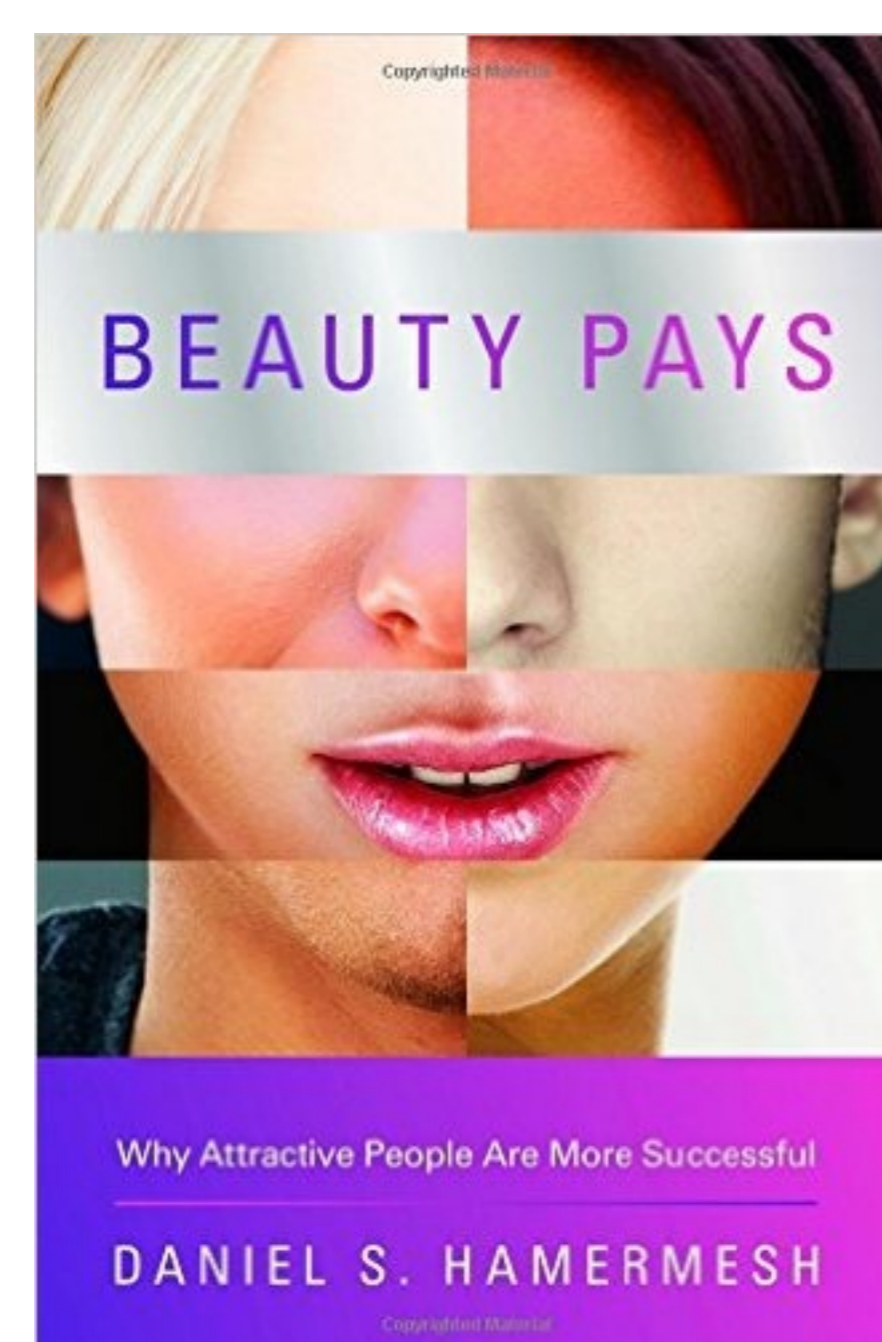
Several authors argue against using the exchange model (or “market metaphor”) to explain people's connectedness (e.g. Martin & George, 2006). Yet, a large body of research suggests that **distribution of material resources** is a crucial (although not the only) element in understanding why some people are more socially attractive than other. An individual must continually invest time, energy, and resources in building and maintaining relationships with other people. “To **take without giving** something back runs the risk that others might resent you and might ultimately reject or exclude you from the group” (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008:260).

Attractiveness as an asset

Personal attractiveness becomes an increasingly important factor in multiple social domains (e.g., Hakim, 2010).

Empirical studies show that more attractive people

- Earn more money (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994)
- Get lower bail set (Downs & Lyons, 1991)
- More easily influence others (Chaiken, 1979)



Hypothesis

In the neoliberal world, to have connections a person needs a minimal set of resources, including economic assets, communicational skills, good health and cognitive functioning, time, and last but not least attractive physical appearance.

Research Questions

- What material resources make some older people highly socially attractive?
- What is the “asset portfolio” that determines social exclusion of older adults in Europe in early 21st century?
- Does it vary across European countries and historical periods?

Data and Variables

- The 4th wave of the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE, 2010/11).
- Objective outcomes are constructed using the question “Please name 7 confidants (a person, with whom you discuss important things)”:

 1. Having friends among your confidants
 2. Having a big social network (4+ confidants)

- Subjective outcome (Loneliness): “How much of the time do you feel lonely?”
- Predictors: personal resources
 1. Economic assets, education, cognitive skills, health, demographic variables
 2. Physical attractiveness: BMI and height are commonly used in beauty economics (Liu and Sierminska, 2014). Also added a measure of physical fitness

Results

Linear probability model. Material and non-material correlates of friendship and loneliness			
	Having Friends	Big Social Network	Reporting Loneliness
Male	-0.0800*** [0.0044]	-0.0782*** [0.0042]	-0.0164*** [0.0043]
Living with a partner	-0.1594*** [0.0053]	-0.0016 [0.0049]	-0.2302*** [0.0056]
Number of children	-0.0194*** [0.0015]	0.0246*** [0.0015]	-0.0055*** [0.0015]
College edu or more	0.0760*** [0.0056]	0.0454*** [0.0054]	0.0035 [0.0046]
Top 2 income quintiles	0.0224*** [0.0045]	0.0163*** [0.0045]	-0.0039 [0.0040]
Owning a house (vs tenant)	-0.0146** [0.0052]	-0.0031 [0.0050]	-0.0027 [0.0050]
Owning a second house	0.0253*** [0.0055]	0.0306*** [0.0056]	-0.0005 [0.0046]
Owning a car	0.0088 [0.0053]	-0.0024 [0.0053]	-0.0167** [0.0056]
Having monetary assets (eg., stocks, MF, IRA)	0.0374*** [0.0050]	0.0392*** [0.0049]	0.0058 [0.0045]
Good self-reported health	0.0094* [0.0044]	0.0015 [0.0043]	-0.0687*** [0.0045]
Verbal fluency score (name animals)	0.0049*** [0.0003]	0.0038*** [0.0003]	-0.0014*** [0.0003]
Look back on life with happiness	0.0126* [0.0056]	0.0342*** [0.0052]	-0.1020*** [0.0064]
Overweight (BMI>=25 kg/m²)	-0.0081* [0.0041]	-0.0087* [0.0039]	-0.0072 [0.0039]
Short (1st tertile of height)	-0.0026 [0.0048]	0.0041 [0.0047]	0.007 [0.0047]
Physical inactivity (hardly ever vigorous sport)	-0.0708*** [0.0056]	-0.0542*** [0.0054]	0.0575*** [0.0071]
Given practical help to others outside hh	0.0600*** [0.0050]	0.0722*** [0.0050]	-0.0056 [0.0043]
Given financial gifts 250 euro or more	0.0440*** [0.0048]	0.0684*** [0.0048]	0.0012 [0.0041]
N	50945	50963	44413
R²	0.1355	0.0745	0.1905

Standard errors (clustered by hh) in brackets
 * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The OLS regressions also control for country of residence, the type of settlement (e.g., big city, small town), age and depression.

Results

- Men are less likely to have friends, as well as networks with 4 or more confidants, and yet they are also less likely to report loneliness.
- Partner and children are negatively related to having friends and to reporting loneliness. In addition, children increase the network size.
- Having at least college education increases both the likelihood of having friends and of big social network.
- People, who help others practically or financially, are more likely to have friends and big social networks. Still, except the main residence, ownership of substantial economic resources contributes to having friends and big social networks.
- Owning a car is associated with decrease in reporting loneliness.
- As expected, being overweight is negatively correlated with having friends and with big social networks. The same is true with respect to the lack of vigorous sportive activity. In addition, this variable correlates positively with loneliness.
- Having good, very good or excellent self-reported health is positively associated with having friends and negatively with loneliness.
- Cognitive skills and mental wellbeing contribute to having friends, big network size and less loneliness.

Discussion

As the exchange theory suggests, and even after controlling for provision of practical or financial aid to others, older adults equipped with greater personal resources, such as economic capital or bodily characteristics, are more socially attractive as reflected by the likelihood of having friends and of bigger social networks.

Having partner and children decreases the probability of having friends, however it also reduces reporting loneliness. This is possibly because family consumes personal time or energy at the friends' expense.

More research is needed to establish the *direction of causation*, as well as to address the question of changes in the “asset portfolio” behind friendship in Europe. For example, SHARE contains evidence that the use of Internet greatly increases social connectedness of the respondents. In addition, the changing role of the welfare state should be accounted for.

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