



# Feeling lonely in a foreign country

**PREVALENCE, CAUSES, AND COPING STRATEGIES OF OLDER MIGRANTS. EVIDENCE FROM ITALY**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Since the mid-1970s, Italy has become an immigration country

- a wide variety of nationalities
- 7.8% of the total population
- 2.3% of people over 65 in 2011 - and about 22% in 2061 (Istat projections)

The older migrant population consists of three groups:

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> generation – the pioneers, usually males, who came to Italy at young ages for labour purposes
2. Their followers, usually female partners, arrived for family reunification
3. Migrants' ascendants, the so-called zero generation – those who emigrated to Italy at a relatively old age, through family reunification

# RATIONALE AND AIM OF THE STUDY

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**The double condition of being migrant and being aged increases the risk of being vulnerable and, accordingly, the risk of feeling lonely**

**Ageing migrants often face financial deprivation, poor housing conditions, and health problems**

**In addition, language and cultural barriers restrict their participation in social activities outside home, resulting in a relatively small and homogenous social network**

**The aim of this paper is to obtain more insight into the prevalence and causes of loneliness among Albanian and Moroccan older migrants in Italy and their coping strategies**

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

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1. To what extent do older Albanian and Moroccan migrants experience loneliness?
2. What are the main causes of their loneliness?
3. What are their main ways to avoid or combat loneliness?

**Data: in-depth interviews with 50 migrants (aged 50 and over) residing in the Marche Region, from Albanian (35) and Morocco (15) origin**

**They were interviewed both in private and public spaces (e.g. at home, at the university, in a public café)**

**The in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in Albanian, Arab and/or Italian, depending on the participant's preference, and lasted from two to three hours**

# DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Albanians		Moroccans	
	N	%, mean	N	%, mean
gender (female)	23	66	4	27
age	35	65	15	59
single	0	0	1	7
married	26	74	13	86
divorced	2	6	0	0
widowed	7	20	1	7
labour	9	26	11	74
follower	2	6	2	13
zero generation	24	68	2	13
education - no school	1	3	4	27
education - primary school	10	29	2	13
education - secundar school	13	37	8	53
education - university	11	31	1	7
children in Italy	35	2.4	14	3.3
children in origin country	5	0.1	4	0.5
short permit of stay	5	14	0	0
long permit of stay	25	72	9	60
Italian citizenship	5	14	6	40
length of residence in Italy	35	12.8	15	22.2

# FINDINGS (1): PREVALENCE OF LONELINESS

## *The De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale*

	Yes	More or less	No
<i>There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems</i>		1	1
<i>I miss having a really close friend</i>	1	1	
<i>I experience a general sense of emptiness</i>	1	1	
<i>There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems</i>		1	1
<i>I miss the pleasure of the company of others</i>	1	1	
<i>I find my circle of friends and acquaintances too limited</i>	1	1	
<i>There are many people I can trust completely</i>		1	1
<i>There are enough people I feel close to</i>		1	1
<i>I miss having people around me</i>	1	1	
<i>I often feel rejected</i>	1	1	
<i>I can call on my friends whenever I need them</i>		1	1

# FINDINGS (1): PREVALENCE OF LONELINESS

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1. No less than 86% of the Albanians and 80% of the Moroccans are lonely (score 3+)
2. Albanians are somewhat lonelier than Moroccans (6.1 against 5.6)
3. Males are somewhat lonelier than females (6.3 against 5.7)
4. Female zero-generation migrants are more lonely than their first-generation counterparts (5.9 against 4.8)
5. Male first-generation migrants are more lonely than their zero-generation counterparts (6.6 against 5.3)

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

## 1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers

- *language barriers which make it difficult to talk with Italian neighbours (and, if any, Italian children-in-law)*

*Here I cannot exchange two words with anybody, only good morning and good evening. In Albania I always met someone, even when I went to buy bread, and always had a chat, here instead it is not possible. In the apartment above there is an old lady, she is kind, we say hello and exchange a few words, half in Italian and half in Albanian... The neighbours are all very friendly, always greet us but what can we speak with them?! To the lady upstairs, our landlady, very nice but also Italian, we just say hi. I cannot talk to her a lot because of the language. (Albanian woman, zero generation)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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## Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

### 1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers

- *language barriers which make it difficult to talk with Italian neighbours (and, if any, Italian children-in-law)*
- *lack of financial means which are necessary to meet people (drink a cup of coffee, visiting people, etc.)*

*I am not Italian, Italians have money, I don't have and I so can't go outside home, the economic freedom gives you every possibility. Here, up to now, we don't have a pension so we have to ask to our children [for money]. They would give us whatever we want but we don't ask. They're already making a lot of sacrifices for us and they have their own financial problems. We cannot ask them money for a bus ticket to go downtown. Having friends means to go to a bar, taking a coffee, one time you pay for them and next time they pay for you. But without money what can we do? (Albanian man, zero generation)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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- *lack of financial means which is necessary to meet people (drink a cup of coffee, visiting people, etc.)*
- *lack of free time due to job, looking after grandchildren, taking care of ill family member*

*I would like to have some time for myself, because most of my time I spend to help my husband in all of his things. My husband is not well and I cannot talk about many things with him anymore, he is no longer the partner I used to have, I don't have other people of my age to spend time with and I miss this very much. (Albanian woman, zero generation)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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- *no driven license which is in the hilly Marche region necessary when going out*

*Here it's difficult to get around without a car, it's all uphill and downhill and we are not able to have long walks (Albanian woman, zero generation)*

*We don't drive so our children have to bring us to the mosque that is far from our house (Moroccan woman, follower)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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*Zero-generation respondents face these causes more often than their first-generation counterparts (shorter stay in Italy – less time to adapt; not receiving a pension – more financially dependent on their children; stronger focus on family – looking after the grandchildren)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers
2. Societal factors that hinder migrants to have more contact and meet new people

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers
2. Societal factors that hinder migrants to have more contact and meet new people
  - *discrimination/hostility of Italian native population*

*(Why does a migrant feel lonely?) Because when he [a migrant] talks to Italians, they exclude him from society and discriminate against him. (Moroccan man, labour migrant)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers
2. Societal factors that hinder migrants to have more contact and meet new people
  - *discrimination/hostility of Italian native population*
  - *high work ethic, few time for socializing*

*Here people run after the job, they are married to the job and fear to loose it, and this becomes contagious, we are doing the same. In Albania it's different, we try to work less and enjoy life more. (Albanian man, labour migrant)*

*It is difficult for elderly people to feel lonely in Morocco because even if they don't live with their family, if they go out, everywhere it's full of people, in the streets, cafes, mosques. People have more leisure time. Here, the mosque is only open on Fridays, sometimes in the evening, and people are taken up with their work. (Moroccan man, labour migrant)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

1. Lack of personal resources to meet peers
2. Societal factors that hinder migrants to have more contact and meet new people
  - *discrimination/hostility of Italian native population*
  - *high work ethic, few time for socializing*
  - *less than preferred number of meeting places (teahouses, mosques) for the male migrants; no special meeting places/social activities for the female migrants*

*There are two meeting places, but the Albanians who go there never bring their wives along, only men go out for fun. (Albanian man, labour migrant)*

# FINDINGS (2): CAUSES OF LONELINESS

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Insufficient meaningful relationships outside the family due to

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  - *discrimination/hostility of Italian native population*
  - *high work ethic, few time for socializing*
  - *less than preferred number of meeting places (teahouses, mosques) for the male migrants; no special meeting places/social activities for the female migrants*
  - *pool of migrants small, especially pool of educated migrants*

*Another problem of immigration is that you create friendships, but these are friendships "at random" because you don't have much choice, are superficial relations. I can't find the people with whom I'm completely compatible with (Albanian woman, labour migrant)*

# FINDINGS (3): COPING STRATEGIES

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There are three ways to cope with loneliness:

1. An active way – actions people can take to improve their social network, either quantitative or qualitative
2. A regulative way, referring to all kind of actions that people can take to lower their standards and expectations regarding their social network
3. Reducing the perceived importance of the social deficiency between the actual and desired social network by seeking distraction in other activities or by denying or accepting the loneliness problem

# FINDINGS (3): COPING STRATEGIES

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The first way of coping (improving social network) is less often practiced than the two others due to factors like language barriers and lack of time, financial means and ethnic-specific facilities in the neighbourhood

**Pendular life serves as a buffer against extreme loneliness**

*(Why do you go to Morocco?) Because my mother and my brother are there. Moreover, I really miss my friends. (Moroccan man, labour migrant)*

*(Why do you go to Albania?) Because I miss what I find when I'm in Albania. I feel good there. I'm always talking to my friends and neighbours. We drink coffee. Here, there's a lot of loneliness. (Albanian man, labour migrant)*

# FINDINGS (3): COPING STRATEGIES

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Within the second way of coping (lowering relationship standards and expectations), they especially compare their situation with Italian peers

Because of having (grand)children living close to them, they are almost never alone and in this respect, they are satisfied and believe they are in a more favourable position than their Italian peers

Almost all participants refer to a native Italian old person when thinking about a lonely person

*When I think about a lonely person I think about an Italian lady who has two children but they never come to stay with her. Italians are so individualistic. I can't imagine how awful life will be without children and grandchildren and relatives around me. (Moroccan woman, follower)*

*I think that older Albanians are more lucky than their Italian peers, because we are very close to our children. (Albanian man, zero generation)*

# FINDINGS (3): COPING STRATEGIES

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Within the third way of coping, the perceived importance of the loneliness problem is mainly reduced by seeking distraction in performing domestic activities (looking after grandchildren)

This especially holds for the zero generation and, due to their kin-keeping role, women in particular

*I've never felt lonely, I came to see my children, I'm surrounded by my grandchildren, we are all together. Instead what I really miss is my home, but I try not to think about it and to focus on my family's needs, what an elder should do else? (Moroccan woman, zero generation)*

*I don't have time to go outside, I'm always busy, I never stop cooking, washing and looking after my young grandchildren. Now my grandchildren are my priority. When they will grow up and will not need me anymore I will turn back to Morocco with my husband to die there, at home. (Moroccan woman, follower)*

# PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

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- Loneliness seems to be a severe problem among Albanian and Moroccan older migrants in Italy
- To overcome or avoid loneliness feelings, they rather use regulative ways of coping (lowering their relationship standards and expectations) than active ones
- This finding is not surprising: old people are more oriented to fulfil their present emotional well-being, in this case by focusing on the necessities of (grand)children, than in investing in future goals
- Although the participants would like to employ the active way of coping as well (improving their relationships), factors like language barriers and lack of time, financial means and ethnic-specific facilities in the neighbourhood are hindering to do so

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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## Key features of “older migrant-friendly cities”

- **Integration programmes for both migrants and non-migrants (e.g. language courses, campaigns against discrimination)**
- **Accessible and affordable transport services**
- **Ethnic-specific meeting places**
- **Flexible forms of housing that better fit with older migrants' pendular life**

# *thank you*

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