

Social networks and inclusion in physical places and digital spaces: Experiences of mid-older aged LGBTQ+ adults and adults with a learning disability

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Introduction

Participation in community life is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. This includes engagement across both:

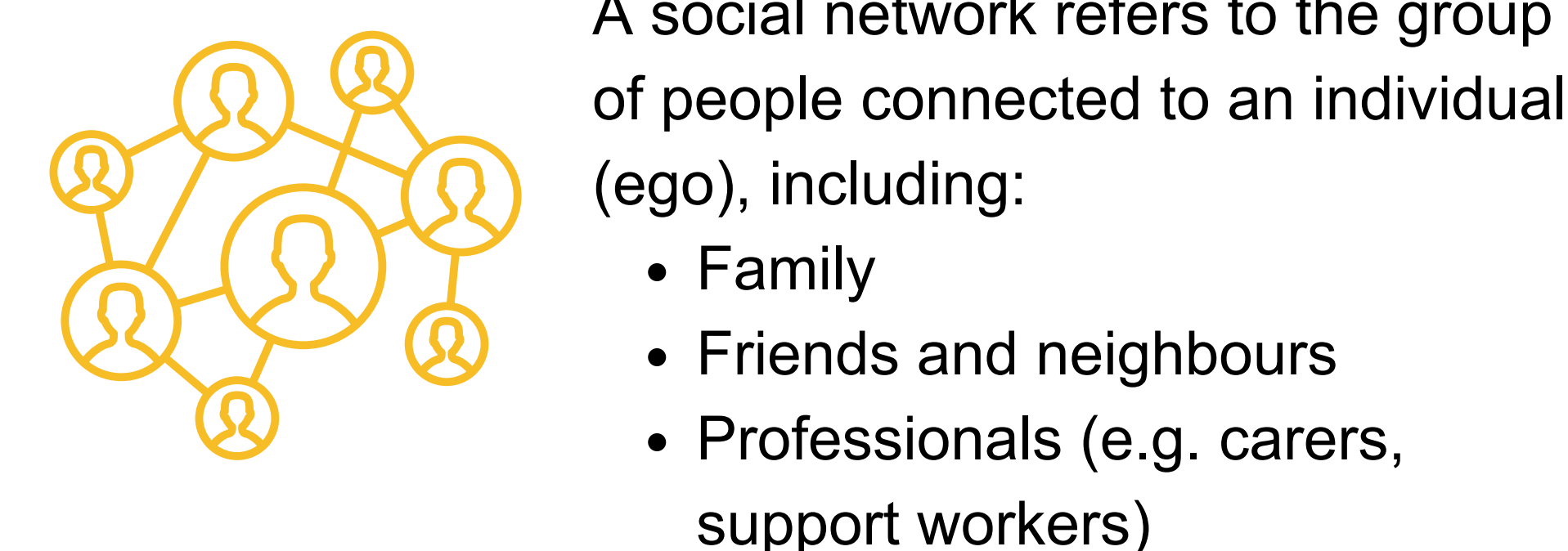


However, opportunities for participation are not equally distributed. Mid-older adults with a learning disability and mid-older LGBTQ+ adults may experience social, structural, and relational barriers to inclusion.

Aim

To examine how social networks shape experiences of participation, inclusion, and support across physical and digital contexts.

Conceptualising Social Networks



A social network refers to the group of people connected to an individual (ego), including:

- Family
- Friends and neighbours
- Professionals (e.g. carers, support workers)

This study examines:

- Network size and variability
- Relationship types
- Modes of contact (in-person and online)
- Distribution of supportive ties
- Network diversity in relation to identity

Methods

Design

Mixed-methods, network-informed qualitative study.

Sample

- N = 30 mid-older adults
- LGBTQ+ (n = 14)
 - Learning disability (LD) (n = 16)

Data Collection

- Participants:
- Created ego-centric network maps using pen, paper, and coloured dots
 - Identified:
 - Important relationships
 - Modes of contact
 - Supportive ties

Dot Coding

- **Blue** = in-person (physical) contact
- **Red** = online (digital) contact
- **Green** = supportive relationships

Maps were used to guide semi-structured interviews exploring participation in everyday life.

Interim Findings

1 Network Size and Distribution

Social networks varied substantially across participants:

- Mean = 14.9 alters
- Median = 14
- Range = 5–33
- SD = 7.3

Group	Mean	Median	SD	Range
LGBTQ+	12.4	14	4.1	5–18
LD	17.1	16	8.7	6–33

Interpretation: Participants with learning disabilities showed larger networks on average and greater variability in network size

2 Network Composition

Relationship Type	LD Mean	LGBTQ+ Mean	Total Mean
Family	5.88	4.43	5.2
Professionals	5.13	1.71	3.53
Friends & Neighbours	7.38	6.21	6.83

Key Findings

- No significant differences in family or friends ($p > .05$)
- Significantly more professionals in LD networks ($t = 2.51$, $p < .05$)

Interpretation

Networks of participants with learning disabilities are more institutionally embedded, reflecting formalised support structures.

3 Modes of Contact

Contact Type	Mean	Median	Range
In-person (Blue)	12.1	11	3–30
Online (Red)	6.97	5	0–16

Support within modes:

Type	Mean Support	Approx. % Support
In-person supportive	2.3	~19%
Online supportive	0.7	~10%

Interpretation

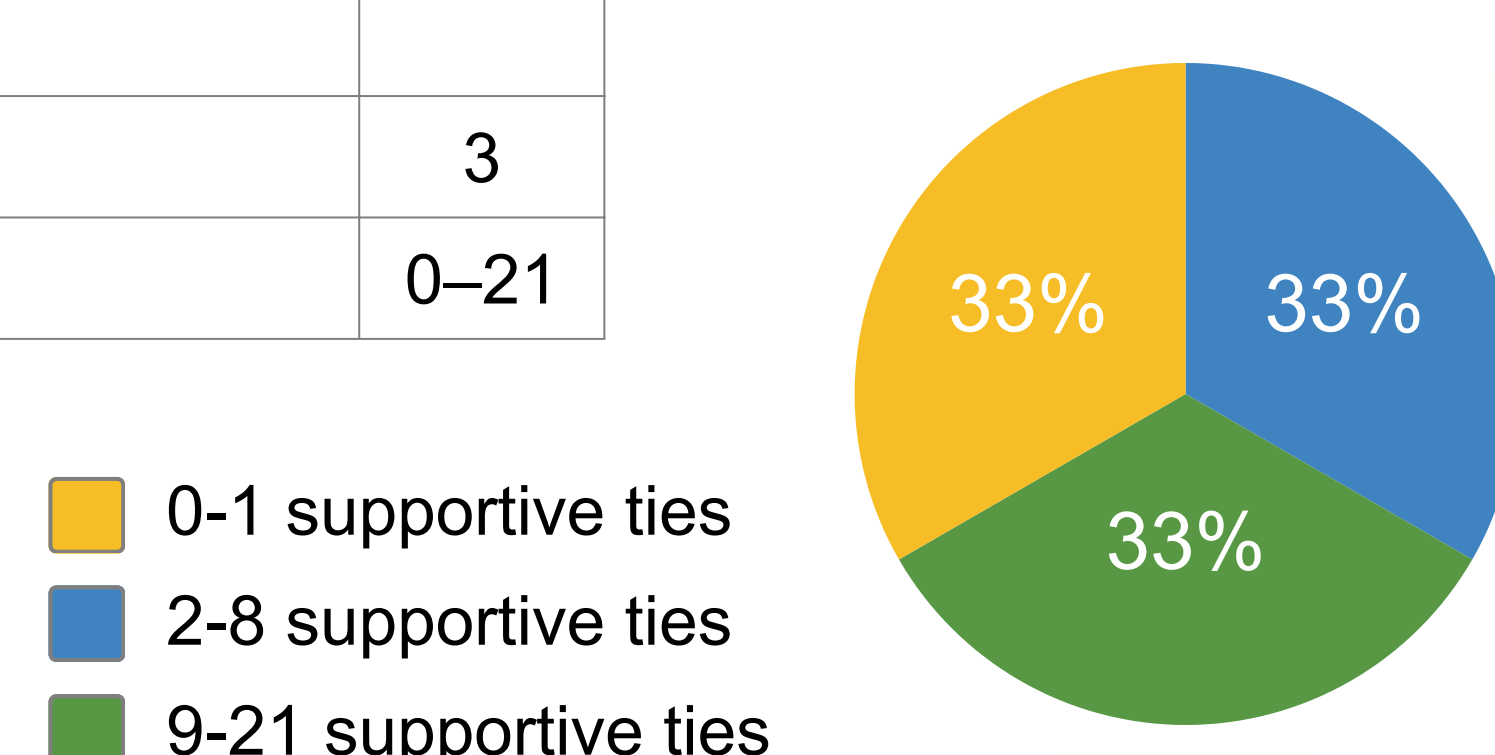
Networks are predominantly in-person, but often hybrid. Support is more frequently associated with in-person relationships, though present in both contexts.

4 Supportive Relationships

Measure	Value
Mean supportive ties	6.03
Median	3
Range	0–21

Approximately 20–40% of ties were identified as supportive.

Distribution:



Interpretation

Support is unevenly distributed across networks, indicating variability in relational resources.

5 Diversity Within Networks

Type of Diversity	Overall	LGBTQ+	LD
Intergenerational	97%	High	High
Sexuality diversity	60%	78%	22%
Disability diversity	56.70%	14.30%	93.80%

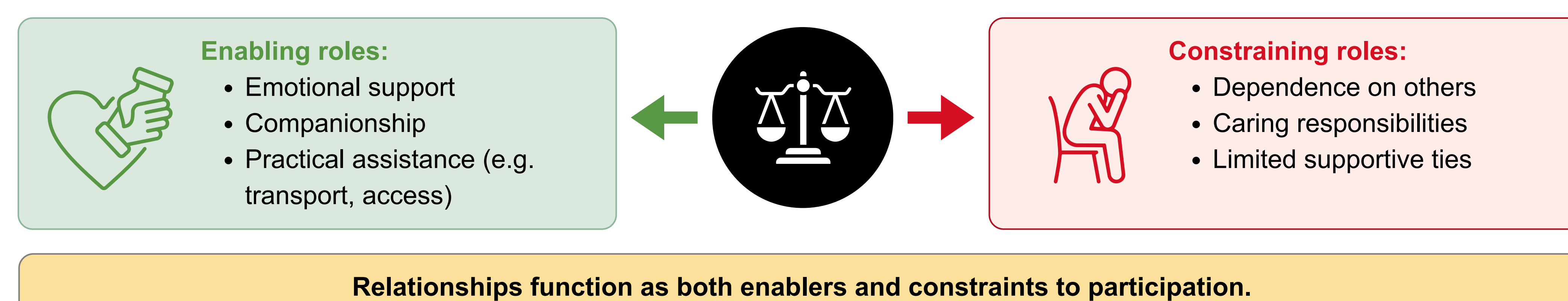
- Sexuality diversity: $\chi^2 = 17.5$, $p < .001$
- Disability diversity: $\chi^2 = 19.2$, $p < .001$

Interpretation

Network diversity aligns closely with participants' own identities, suggesting the importance of shared lived experience in shaping social connections.

6 Qualitative Insights: Relationships and Participation

Participation in community life is strongly relationally mediated.



Discussion

These findings extend beyond place-based approaches to inclusion by highlighting the importance of relational dynamics.

- Participation depends not only on access to environments but on:
 - Network composition
 - Quality of relationships
 - Availability of support
- Individuals may appear socially connected but experience relational exclusion
- Differences between groups point to:
 - Structural inequalities in support systems
 - Variations in autonomy and dependency



Conclusion

- Social networks play a central role in shaping inclusion and participation
- Supportive relationships are not evenly distributed
- Network composition differs significantly across groups
- Identity influences the diversity and structure of networks

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Move beyond access-focused models of inclusion
- Prioritise strengthening supportive relationships
- Recognise the importance of hybrid (online and in-person) networks
- Support person-centred, relational approaches to community inclusion



Scan to visit the IncludeAge website:
www.includeage.co.uk

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