OLDER MEN AND THEIR SOCIAL CONNECTIONS: FIRST FINDINGS FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND COHORT FOR THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AGEING (NICOLA)

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Background: Social relationships and connectedness with other people and activities are significant aspects of ageing well and of preventing loneliness. Thus, it is imperative that we understand the experiences, barriers and opportunities around making people feel socially connected in later life. However, older men are often missing from gerontological literature and research. This paper will address this gap to explore the pattern of relationships and social connectedness among older men in Northern Ireland.

Methods: NICOLA – the Northern Ireland Cohort for the Longitudinal Study of Ageing – is a longitudinal study of a representative sample of adults aged 50 years or over living in their own home in Northern Ireland. NICOLA was designed to maximise comparability with longitudinal studies such as TILDA and ELSA. Data collection comprised a Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI), a self-completion questionnaire, as well as a health assessment. The first wave of CAPI interviews was conducted between December 2013 and March 2016.

Results: CAPI interviews were completed with 8,504 people aged 50 years or over, of whom 45% were male. Men were more likely than women to live with a spouse or partner, and less likely to live alone. However, levels of social connectedness were lower among men than women. In particular, men had less frequent contact with their children or their relatives.

Conclusion: Gender relations provide a useful framework to explore how older people living in Northern Ireland negotiate relationships and connect with family and friends. In addition, gender bisects the experience of ageing at specific points in time. For example, men’s shorter life expectancy means that they are likely to experience the death of any female partner. However, given their lower levels of social connectedness, and higher risk of social isolation, it is important that research and services address the needs of older men.