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Concern About Reputation May Undermine the Health Benefits of Community Ties

～Why Strong Community Ties Are Not Always Beneficial for Mental Health～

Trust, mutual help, and attachment within local communities can benefit mental health. However, strong community cohesion may also have negative effects, such as increased concern about how one is perceived by others. In this study, we analyzed cross-sectional data from approximately 23,000 older adults to examine the relationships among community social cohesion, concern about reputation, and depressive symptoms. Our results showed that in communities with stronger social cohesion, individuals tended to be more concerned about how they were viewed by others, and this concern offset the positive mental health benefits of community cohesion. These negative effects were particularly pronounced among individuals with lower levels of education. By paying attention to both the positive and negative aspects of community cohesion, it is important to promote social connectedness while fostering open communities that do not intensify concerns about reputation.

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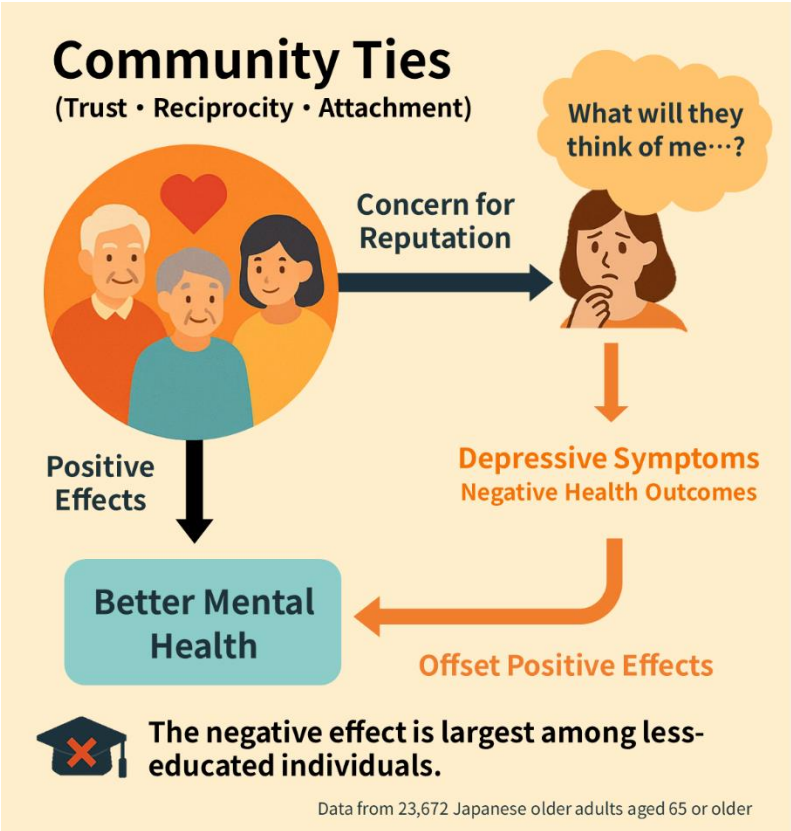

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Background

A large body of research has shown that community social cohesion has beneficial effects on health among older adults. However, some studies have suggested that highly cohesive communities may also have negative aspects, such as strong normative pressures. For example, individuals may experience stress or pressure as they try to avoid being criticized by others. This may, in turn, worsen depressive symptoms or discourage people from seeking help. Through collaboration between researchers in psychology and public health, this study focused on concern about reputation, an important factor that has not been directly examined in previous research. We tested the hypothesis that living in a highly cohesive community increases concern about reputation, which in turn exacerbates depressive symptoms and reluctance to seek help (such as feeling reluctant to talk to someone or ask for help when worried or stressed).

Participants and Methods

We analyzed data from 23,672 adults aged 65 years and older who participated in the 2019 wave of the Japan Gerontological Evaluation Study (JAGES). Community social cohesion was assessed using responses to three questions: “In general, do you think that people living in your community can be trusted” “In general, do you think people in your community try to help each other?” “How attached are you to the community you currently live in?” These measures were operationalized at both the individual level and the community level (the average response within each school district). Concern about reputation was measured using responses to the statement: “I am concerned about how other people in my communities think of me.” Multilevel analyses* were conducted to account for variability at the municipal, school district, and individual levels.

Results

Individuals who perceived higher levels of community cohesion in their own neighborhoods tended to report fewer depressive symptoms and less reluctance to seek help. However, at the community level, living in communities with high overall levels of cohesion was associated with increased concern about reputation, which in turn was linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms. These negative effects were particularly evident among individuals with lower educational attainment (12 years of education or less), suggesting that strong community cohesion may impose a greater burden on socially disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

This study highlights a paradox in the effects of community social cohesion on mental health. At the individual level, feeling trust and attachment to one’s community may contribute to better mental health. However, in environments with strong community-wide cohesion, increased concern about how one is perceived by others may lead to psychological pressure and worsening depressive symptoms. Such negative effects may be especially pronounced in societies like Japan, where social conformity and mutual monitoring are culturally emphasized.

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Significance

While community ties can be an important source of support for the mental health of older adults, they may also heighten concerns about reputation and create psychological pressure. Future community development and policy efforts should not only promote social cohesion but also work toward creating open environments where everyone can seek help without fear of social judgment.

Published Article

Huang, K.-J., Uchida, Y., Takemura, K., Fukushima, S., Aida, J., Hanazato, M., Kanamori, M. (2025). *Paradoxical effects of community social cohesion on mental health and help-seeking among older adults: The role of reputation concern and socioeconomic status*. Social Science & Medicine, 380, 118234.
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Glossary

* Multilevel analysis

Multilevel analysis is a statistical method that allows simultaneous examination of individual-level and community-level factors influencing health outcomes. It enables researchers to assess how both personal characteristics and the characteristics of the communities in which people live are differently associated with mental health.