

Loneliness as a Social and Psychological Phenomenon

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Abstract: The article deals with the problem of loneliness as an objective and subjective situation, occurring at interaction of a person and the social environment. Three grounds for loneliness were considered: a) by the levels of interaction of a human with the surrounding world; b) by its duration; and c) by its origin (causes, factor structure). Within the first ground of the classification, four levels of loneliness situations are distinguished: a) *physical* (spatial) loneliness, which makes any forms of contacts of a person with other people impossible; b) *communicative* loneliness, which is observed during staying for a certain period among numerous unknown people; c) *emotional* loneliness, which takes place if one does not have close relations with people including any sexual relationship with someone from the social circle despite they contact and communicate with each other; d) *spiritual* loneliness, which is understood as absence of spiritual consensus of a person with anyone despite the existence of both interaction, communication and emotional contact.

Key words: Physical (spatial) • Communicative • Emotional • Spiritual loneliness • Perception • Crisis • Communication • Interpersonal relations • Experience • Mental state • Social situation • Feeling • Phenomenon • Frustration.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness of a person is a difficult problem determined by social, psychological, economic and cultural factors.

The problem of loneliness of senior people is quite well approached by sociology and social psychology. There is a popular opinion that the problem of loneliness is more typical of senior people. Indeed, they find it difficult to change their social stereotypes. But the contemporary social environment brings teenagers and young people into the social risk envelope, which is caused by alienation. The analysis of the existing situation shows that there is an increase of negative social and psychological phenomena among young people: increase of stressful situations, disorder of interpersonal relations, despair and loneliness. It is loneliness that is deemed one of the main reasons of suicides in young and senior age [1].

The negative experiences of teenagers and young people affect the process of socialization and personality formation and become the main causes of their social deadadaptation. The feeling of their loneliness often results

in the formation of nihilistic attitude of individuals to the society, to the development of such behavior forms, which are oriented to confrontation with it or escaping from it: criminal and extremist deeds, alcohol and drug addiction, etc.

At the same time, we must keep in mind that people also need loneliness to some extent. This refers not only to people with advanced creativity: writers, poets, artists, scientists, etc., but also to people who do not have great talents. It is a known fact that the development of a person reaches a period (adolescence) when the need in loneliness becomes very strong: the person starts feeling the necessity of staying alone with his thoughts and experiences. Lack of such a possibility also causes negative consequences.

Therefore, the problem of loneliness and its experiencing at adolescent age is far from simple. The practical timeliness of development of its various aspects concerns more than just psychology as well as the ways and the methods of its solution do. However, psychology is just the science, within which the problem of loneliness can be studied most comprehensively and the main solution concepts can be determined.

Traditionally, the problem of loneliness has been attracting the attention of philosophers for a long time. The philosophic approach to the loneliness problem is described with the search of in-depth existential and spiritual grounds, because of which the loneliness occurs. Meanwhile, psychology and sociology treat loneliness as a temporary state of human consciousness, a perishable feeling, or experience. Special significance is attached to the study of empirical regularities of this phenomenon. Questionnaires are carried out, the extent of the aptitude to loneliness of people belonging to various age and profession categories is determined, the peculiar features of experiencing the loneliness feeling by certain individuals are analyzed as well as the occasional and perishable reasons of this phenomenon. However, the cross-disciplinary approach to the study of this problem provides multidimensional coverage of it. This idea was mentioned in the classification of loneliness suggested by W.A. Sadler and T.B. Johnson. They distinguished:

- Cosmic loneliness, i.e. apartness of a human from the overall substance (God, nature, higher reason, space);
- Cultural loneliness, i.e. the experiences of a human related to the fact that his values, ideals, notions that have been formed by a particular cultural environment are not understood by the people around;
- Social loneliness, i.e. the experiences of a human related to the limited range of contacts and scope of communication;
- Interpersonal loneliness, i.e. the experiencing by a person of the absence or shortage of spiritual liaison with the person important for him [2].

The research works by M.E. Seligman, F. Fromm-Reichmann and J.W. Young showed the complexity of the loneliness phenomenon, focused on the causes related to both typical situations and the nature of a person [3, 4, 5].

The problem of loneliness is also in the focus of domestic and foreign scientists. The majority of authors studying loneliness finds it an absolutely negative phenomenon and does not pay much attention to its positive aspects. For example, researchers say that loneliness is a negative feeling associated with absence of close, positive emotional ties with people and/or with the fear to lose them. The feeling of loneliness bears a regulatory function and is a feedback mechanism, which helps an individual to control the optimal level of human contacts [6].

The scientific attitude requires all possible aspects of a phenomenon to be studied. In other words, loneliness cannot be narrowed down to a mental state with negative modality of experiences. It is very important to notice that loneliness bears not only the negative charge resulting in destruction of internal balance [7]. It is a much more complicated phenomenon associated with an individual's interaction and interrelations with the surrounding natural and social reality resulting in occurrence of various mental states and experiences. As some researchers notice, the loneliness phenomenon is distinguished for its complexity and ambiguousness in terms of scientific determination and individual comprehension by the researcher [8]. Therefore, consideration of its particular aspects, for example, the internal and external reasons in the individual context of experiences, dependence on social transformations in the society and other aspects is in fact the necessary and reasoned stage of a research.

Thus, the study of perception and experience of loneliness is timely from the practical point of view as these experiences affect the human performance and if the individual is young, they affect the formation of his personality, as well.

Body of the work. The problem of loneliness is the subject of versatile researches by several human sciences: philosophy, psychology, medicine, theology and pedagogy. Each of them has particular features that add new aspects to the study and thus enrich the approaches to its comprehension. The theoretical and artistic understanding of the problem comes from ancient times. Currently, this problem also causes keen interest with philosophers, scientists and cultural luminaries while millions of people experience it in practice.

The loneliness phenomenon has a complicated essence, includes many forms, each of which people experience differently.

D. Perlman and L.A. Peplau distinguished eight theoretical approaches to the problem: psychoanalytic, phenomenological, existential, sociological, interactional, cognitive, intimate and systematic [9].

The most complete review of research works dedicated to the problem from the perspective of analytical psychology and psychodynamics was carried out by P. Leiderman [10] who also made an effort to build a relatively integral conceptual model.

L.A. Peplau, M. Miceli and B. Morasch analyzed the interrelation between loneliness and low self-esteem and claimed that the proof of existence of this interrelation was "the most important result of loneliness studies" [11, 169]. Similar results were obtained by other foreign researchers.

For example, H. Jones found that lonely people had better self-respect, showed less interest to partners, tended to switch conversation topics often [12].

The research works of child loneliness carried out by F. Fromm-Reichman, M. Sullivan, V.G. Aseev, V.V. Davydov [13, 14, 15, 16], which emphasize the complexity of the diagnosing the phenomenon, are to be given prominence.

The main question raised by the analysis of the existing theoretical views of loneliness is whether it is a feeling, a mental state or it is to be considered as a specific aggregate of an individual's life conditions, which aggregate limits his communication with the social environment.

This research is based on the concept of the situation suggested by B.S. Alishev [17]. According to B.S. Alishev, the situation is a kind of circumstance occurring at interaction of an individual with the social environment. Therefore, it is neither an objective nor a subjective phenomenon in the stricter sense. Within this phenomenon, both of them merge and penetrate into each other. Because the interaction of people with the environment is subject to definite common regularities, typical common situations occur involving different people. Based on this, B.S. Alishev determined situation as a "fragment of interaction of a subject with the environment, which interaction is described as having relatively permanent main parameters and consequently as having an integral subject matter and sense" [18, p.12]. Loneliness considered as a short-term phenomenon unconditionally corresponds to this definition, as it lasts until someone breaches it and until the parameters of interaction with the external surrounding change. However, a question arises: what is to be done with chronic permanent loneliness, which becomes a lifestyle? The situational approach can be also applied in this case. Firstly, there are situations of different levels (even international political and historical-cultural situations, which can last for decades and centuries); secondly, despite how long a situation lasts, it exists at the current moment and all other aspects refer to its past and future. Any chronic existing situation is topical only because it exists in the present.

Based on the above-said, we determine loneliness as a specific situation existing in the system of social, cultural, interpersonal ties and relations of an individual, the typical attribute of which is his isolated status in certain aspects of these ties and relations. This situation exists regardless whether it is realized or not, but it cannot

exist without a person being involved. We mean that an individual experiences certain feelings and senses caused by the situation while he is not able to identify the situation itself (he is likely to feel general satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the reason of which he cannot understand or realize). But the situation would not have occurred if the individual would not be involved in it.

Let us analyze the types of loneliness in order to define, which situations of human interaction with the social environment can be associated with this concept. We base on the classification by three grounds: a) by the level of interaction of a human with the surrounding world; b) by its duration; c) by its origin (causes, factor structure).

Within the first ground of the classification, four levels of loneliness situations are distinguished:

- *physical* (spatial) loneliness, which makes any forms of contacts of a person with other people impossible, except for the virtual ones: the Robinson's situation, single sail, etc.;
- *communicative* loneliness, which is observed at staying for a long period among numerous unknown people: a mission to a strange location, a novice in a group and other situations;
- *emotional* loneliness, which takes place if one does not have close people whom he can trust including any sexual relationships with someone from the social circle despite they contact and communicate with each other;
- *spiritual* loneliness, which is understood as absence of spiritual consensus of a person with anyone despite the existence of both interaction, communication and emotional contact.

The ascension from simple to complex takes place on the mentioned levels. The first level is the simplest one and can be identified easily by the individual himself or by a third party observer. The next level, the communicative one, is distinguished for the fact that there are people accessible for communication, but the communication with them is hindered: if the best happens, only episodic exchange of actions and short phrases with different people takes place. The two subsequent levels (of the emotional and spiritual loneliness) psychologically are difficult for external observation. Each of them can be called as *loneliness in a crowd*. These are the situations that are believed to be the most offending in the circumstances of the contemporary hi-tech society.

The second ground of the classification gives reasons to distinguish *episodic* and *chronic* loneliness. We believe that loneliness is to be deemed episodic if it can be ceased at any moment by the individual himself, or if he knows that it will cease to be as soon as certain events take place. The chronic loneliness is the loneliness, the time perspective of which is endless or does not have a definite path in the future and has been lasting for quite a long from the past.

By the third provided ground, we distinguished two versions of loneliness differing from each other by subjective perception and evaluation: *voluntary* and *involuntary*. But from the objectivity point of view, there is little difference between them. For example, in both cases an individual can be deprived of the opportunity to talk to anyone during a certain period. But in the first case, it is his own choice, desire, or conscious sacrifice and in the second case, it happens against his will.

Distinguishing these variants is related to the reasons that cause loneliness situations. They can be broken up into the following groups:

- Reasons initiated by the individual;
- Reasons initiated by other people (ignoring, avoidance, forcible custody, etc.);
- Reasons resulting from a combination of circumstances (objective isolation, which depends neither on the person, nor on other people's actions).

The first group of reasons is in its turn divided into two sub-groups: a) conscious pursuit of loneliness by an individual with a goal on mind; b) tendency to loneliness due to certain traits of the individual's character, which hinder communication and maintenance of close relations with other people.

The most exact concept that describes the integral reaction of a person on a situation, including the situation of loneliness is the *experience* concept [19]. Experience expresses the attitude of a person to phenomena and events taking place in the surrounding world, to people and to himself. Negative experiences are always related to failures in communication, which result in the formation of *anticipatory* experiences. It is a known fact that negative experience of communication contributes to the development of anxiety, which makes certain types of people to start keeping aloof from other people, withdrawing into oneself in order to avoid any failures in the future. At the same time, they have a need to share their emotions and find support by the people around.

This leads to, on the one hand, avoidance of intensive contacts and shyness in a group of strangers, but, on the other hand, such people often show activeness and initiative at selecting partners for their narrow and emotionally comfortable social circle. If this task has been solved successfully, the individual can hardly be deemed lonely despite the limited nature of his social and interpersonal contacts.

A different situation takes place when the task has not been solved or when the individual does not find it necessary, i.e. does not need any emotional contact. The absence of such need is deemed to be a deviation from mental standards, but we believe this need tends to become either weaker or stronger during individual's life. Therefore, even relatively long-lasting situations of absence of emotional closeness and sexual relationship do not cause negative experiences all the time and with everyone.

CONCLUSION

The causes of negative experiences of loneliness most often exist as a single set, i.e. there is certain interdependence and interdetermination between them. As for young people, there are several objective factors that can be distinguished within this set, such as unfavorable situation in a family, conflicts with teachers and peers, loss of academic motivation, isolation and avoidance by others at an educational institution, etc. These factors are so versatile that it is virtually impossible to cover them all. It is to be noted that the existence of such causes is objective and does not depend on the person himself. Therefore, it refers to the objective causality of the loneliness of young people.

However, the objective causes are refracted by the person and acquire personal nature. For example, an inadequate identity being the result of a not overpassed age crisis can result in the person's loneliness. The key reason of loneliness occurrence is the individual himself, i.e. the internal causes are inside the individual, his personal peculiarities, which include his character, orientation, abilities, parameter of mental processes, the whole system of skills, habits and knowledge, the individual experience of the person and the peculiar features of his biological structure.

There is little doubt that some personality traits lead to loneliness. For example, inadequate self-esteem, shyness, closed nature, excessive personal singularity, etc. It was stated that loneliness depends on the self-

attitude of an individual. Lonely people often believe themselves to be the cause of their loneliness due to the deficiencies of their character and personal negative appeal [20]. By providing diagnostics of the personality traits: the character, the orientation, the system of skills, habits and knowledge, teachers and specialists can identify the proneness of the individual's personality to loneliness, which allows to take some preventive measures. Thus, in the young age, the causes of negative experiences of loneliness can be associated with age-specific leitmotifs of the psychosocial development of the personality.

Upon unveiling one's internal world and recognition of one's mental features, an individual can experience exaggerated opinion about his singularity, which promotes the formation of the tendency to loneliness. Unveiling one's internal world is the most valuable psychological acquisition in the adolescent age; still it causes many anxious dramatic experiences. Along with recognition of one's own singularity, uniqueness and difference from other people, an individual can experience the feeling that he is "the most important person in the world". The adolescent Ego is yet indefinite, ambiguous and diffused; often, it is experienced as a vague anxiety or the feeling of internal emptiness, which needs to be filled with something.

Summary:

- The problem of loneliness is a comprehensive problem, which has philosophical, social, psychological and pedagogical aspects.
- Objectively, loneliness is a specific situation existing in the system of social, cultural and interpersonal ties and relations of an individual, the typical attribute of which is his isolated status in certain aspects of these ties and relations.
- This situation can be perceived as an unwanted, personally unacceptable deficiency of communication and positive intimate relations with the people around and cause negative experiences.
- This situation can also be perceived as desired and then it causes positive experiences.
- Real relations do not influence the experience of loneliness as much as the ideal image of what they should be like do, i.e. the modality of experiences depends less on the extent of real loneliness and more on the assessment of its extent as compared to the ideal.

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