

Loneliness: An Obsolete Perception?

by Caroline Singh

Introduction

A thought-provoking article suggesting that, in today's society of instant communication via a myriad of microchip-aided devices, how is it that individuals appear to experience greater difficulty with the eon-enduring perception of loneliness? It explores why 21st century loneliness may have catastrophic implications for the well-being of generations to come unless focus changes from reliance on two dimensional, impersonal friendships maintained on websites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, mobile phone texting and other remote connects to ensuring the art of conversation and face-to-face contact is re-established.

While solitude and aloneness allows an individual the opportunity for inner focus and growth, those who succumb to the apparent epidemic of gauging their image and worth via technologically-enhanced media face an increasingly alarming prospect of a decrease in their self-esteem and a decline towards Anxiety, Depression and Social Phobia.

Loneliness, defined as emotional and/or social isolation, was researched by Robert Weiss in 1973, however the 21st

century appears to be creating catastrophic new variants of loneliness, fuelled by a loss of meaningful face-to-face connection and over-reliance on communication technology. Maria Murray in her book, *Living our Times*, says 'Loneliness is distinguished by its paradoxical nature; its isolation is felt most profoundly amongst a crowd' (Murray, 2008:207).

Alarmingly, 'at any given time, roughly 20 percent of individuals – that would be sixty million people in the USA

alone – feel sufficiently isolated for it to be a major source of unhappiness in their lives'. 'The culprit behind these dire statistics is not usually being literally alone, but the subjective experience known as loneliness' (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009:5) and yet communication is better than it ever has been – a 2008 survey showed there were more mobile phones than people in Ireland, generating an average of 25 million texts a day.

To define loneliness, researchers use the UCLA Loneliness

Scale (Russell, 1994), to quantify the presence and/or severity of loneliness. Another means, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) indicates what emotional region of the brain is activated when we experience rejection (Cacioppo&Patrick, 2009:8).

Loneliness has many precipitants, including: moving house/to a new area, separation or divorce, bereavement, lack of money, being ill, trauma, aging, gender issues, social class, racism or unemployment, none of which are solely 21st century phenomena although 'observers believe that changes in the way we work and live in the 21st century in Western society are having a negative impact on our mental and emotional health' (Mental Health Foundation, 2010:7), thus differentiating how the precipitants are perceived.

The Internet – Friend or Foe?

Cacioppo/Christiakakis/Fowler found 'lonely people spread their feelings of loneliness through social networks, and that the spread of loneliness is stronger than the spread of perceived social connection' (Mental Health Foundation, 2010:12). Whereas a 2007 study by Pew Internet and American Life Project among 700 teens aged 12-17, found that '94% of teens in the US use the Internet, with 63% doing so daily', utilising sites such as MySpace which enables individuals to 'create digital representations of themselves'. (Patchin&Hinduja, 2010:198-199).

Anneli Rufus (2008) commented that 'The internet is, for loners, an absolute and total miracle' (Mental Health Foundation, 2010:10). However, even in 2002 Nie&Erbring raised the question whether the Internet would create a 'society of

lonely ex-couch potatoes glued to computer screens, whose human contact are largely impersonal and whose political beliefs are easily manipulated, relying on the icons of a wired or wireless society' (Nie&Erbring, 2002:276).

The monumental rise in internet social networking meets a need, as Cacioppo/Patrick observe, 'When people feel socially connected, molehills are not mountains' (Cacioppo&Patrick, 2009:239). The Mental Health Foundation study, *The Lonely Society?*, found that, 'In modern times, electronic communication appears to be keeping many of us connected. Two thirds (62%) say technology helps us to stay in touch with people we might otherwise lose touch with' (Mental Health Foundation, 2010:22).

Childhood - The Formative Years

Without meaningful connection at home, youngsters 'Many under 16, spend more than 20 hours per/week glued to the internet and leave their mobile phones on all night in case they receive a text message' (Mooney, 2008). Tom Morgan, writing in the Herald in May 2010 and interviewing Christopher Cloke of the NSPCC found that, 'Last year ChildLine received nearly 10,000 calls from children saying they felt lonely - an increase of 60% from five years ago' (www.herald.ie).

Leanne Rivers, co-director of the Samaritans' Central London branch noted 'Social networking has not helped because it is a remote connect. Some young people don't have any real friends' (www.timesonline.co.uk:2009). The Lonely Society's 2010 reported that 'nearly 60% of those aged 18-34 reported feeling lonely sometimes or often' and suggest that 'the explanation for loneliness lies with modern communication tools. Many social

networking sites allow for only superficial exchange of ideas and interaction' (Casey, 2010).

Additionally, given Facebook's popularity, Kirkpatrick's book contains an ominous caveat that: "For some, Facebook may generate a false sense of companionship and over time increase a feeling of aloneness" (Kirkpatrick, 2010:14).

Adulthood Presents its Own Loneliness Difficulties

'For citizens of the 21st century, "the way things used to be" - being bound to your village, marrying someone chosen by your family, and otherwise doing whatever your priest or your parents, or your tribal elders tell you to - is not a life plan with much appeal' (Cacioppo&Patrick, 2009:248) and this is perhaps where today's problems lie. Relationships are more fluid in society today with less marriage and more divorce leading to one parent families and single occupant dwellings. One Article, *The Solitary Self*, observes 'A decline in the nuclear family and a rise in the numbers of professional people who choose not to have children have created a significant population over the ages of 40 and 50 that lives alone' (www.timesonline.co.uk).

Whereas elders experience the death of their friends, siblings or partner and fail to grasp the Internet, they still possess a set of social skills, created in an era when friendships were deemed important, social skills encouraged and relating was face-to-face. However, The Times reported in December 2009, 'Statistics suggest a loosening of family and social ties even as digital networks accumulate', so the families of the elderly are less inclined to embrace ties

with family elders and this has led to ‘an increase in ‘paupers’ funerals” in the absence of family and friends willing to bear the costs of a conventional ceremony’ (Kelbie&Davies,2009) while Age Concern Foundation research found that ‘one in ten say that they (elders) always or often feel lonely. Almost half of those studied consider television their main form of company and half a million spent Christmas Day alone’ (Bennett&Bowers,2009).

Current Interventions

Masi et al highlight four primary strategies of loneliness reduction interventions:

- (a) Improving social skills
- (b) Enhancing social support
- (c) Increasing opportunities for social interaction
- (d) Addressing maladaptive social cognition

Of these, (a) and (d) were seen to focus on ‘quality of social interaction and therefore address loneliness more directly’ However, in summarising their Meta-analysis, they found that all of the reviews concluded that questions remain regarding the efficacy of interventions and that more rigorous research is needed in this area (Masi, et al,2010:4).

A Social Exclusion Taskforce was set up in June 2006 to recognise the implications to physical and mental wellbeing that social exclusion creates. In 2010 the first Serious Case Review was implemented following the death of an elderly couple who had been reclusive for several years prior to being found dead at home. The report also recognises that the consequences of social isolation places a ‘huge burden on public services’ (Mental Health Foundation 2010:24).

In Ireland, a Facebook page, ‘Help Reduce Suicide, Depression and Stress-Related Illnesses in Young Adults’ was founded in May 2010 and currently (Jan 2011) has 69,668, (June 2011 85,123) 96,013 (July 2012) who have indicated they ‘Like’ the site. The mission statement of the page, run by Administrators under the title Ólá Golá is ‘a safe on-line community providing care, support and empowerment. A support page for life’ (Ólá Golá,2010). Individuals can post comments or request a PM (private message) where they can discuss personal issues with a mature, trained, support person. Given the high number of site visitors, there is a demand for support of this kind, but it also represents how many troubled individuals are logged onto computers rather than availing of more meaningful face-to-face connection.

A Hypothesis For Future Well-Being

Anthony Storr (1988) ‘argued in favour of an introverted approach to life, proposing that solitude is necessary for mental health and creativity, and that the most profound human experiences have little to do with our relationship with others’ (Mental Health Foundation,2010:3) whereas Victor Frankl (1959) describes loneliness as ‘an opportunity to transcend unimaginably painful conditions and search for meaning through thoughts, memories, hopes, spiritual belief and acts of altruism’. Despite Frankl’s unthinkable suffering and profound inferences, his vision of conquering loneliness assumes its bearer has comparable strength of character and conviction to his own; whereas today’s society, driven by a quest for materialism, replaces

altruism and spirituality with self-centredness and atheism.

Glen Gibson, Psychotherapist, says that ‘Talking therapies can help people to develop self-acceptance, making it easier for them to relate to others’, but adds that ‘no one technique works for all’ and suggests cognitive therapy as an alternative solution (Mental Health Foundation,2010:24). This view is endorsed by Cacioppo&Patrick who note that ‘by reframing our cognitive perceptions, we can begin to change our lives’ (Cacioppo&Patrick,2009:230) .

De Bono observes that ‘you can analyse the past but you need to design the future’. He conceptualises that ‘90% of the errors of ordinary thinking are errors in perception’ (1999:44). He continues with his vision of the future: ‘Simplicity is a key value. As the world gets ever more complicated, simplicity is going to become even more important as a value – otherwise we are going to spend so much time in anxious confusion that we will be unable to enjoy all the benefits offered by technology’ (De Bono,1999:96).

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory perhaps signposts a shift in modern perceptions. Ideally, a large percentage of children develop Secure Attachment in infancy, reflecting those who can enjoy social connection when available, secure in the knowledge that caregivers are accessible, if required. Feeney et al (1999) noted that ‘secure individuals have a high level of self-disclosure, and reciprocate during conversations’.


Secure Attachment is the ideal (and in Bowlby&Greenberg’s 1995 study reflected the highest percentage - 50-65%

of the populous). However, De Bono suggests that ‘technology is already far in advance of the “value concept” we have designed. Technology will support our value concepts – but it will not provide value’ (De Bono,1999:206). How long before the percentage of secure childhood attachments diminishes and instead avoidant, resistant/ambivalent or disorganised/disoriented attachment saturate society?

Gone are the ‘flickering lights of a living room fire and the hearths and tables around which families used to sit’, quoting Alton’s (2006) ruminations, when at least one parent was a dependable, reassuring presence during a child’s formative years and when families sat down together to eat, and if religious, pray together

at home/in church. Conversation today is often replaced by a burning desire to retreat to a solitary place to text, phone, Skype, surf the net, email or continue the day’s workload, the ‘centrifugal force exerted by media that diverts the attention of each family member into a separate room, or at least into a different portion of cyberspace’ (Cacioppo&Patrick,2009:251).

CONCLUSION

‘As life becomes more complicated, “simplicity” becomes a core value, not an add-on cosmetic value’ (De Bono,1999:242). Who, if offered an opportunity to simplify their way of living/being, would not be a tad curious? Surely, as John Cassidy, wrote in the New Yorker in 2006, social network site users are not ‘forgoing the exertion that real relationships entail!’ 



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