

Commentary

# Loneliness and Culture: A Commentary

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## Abstract

Loneliness is the experience that is intertwined with being human, but since it is so painful and troubling, all of us try to avoid it. It has short- and long-term negative consequences, including its influence on our life satisfaction, health, and mortality. Various causal factors were explored regarding loneliness, which is essentially a subjective experience. This commentary aims to highlight the contribution of culture, be it collectivistic or individualistic, to the development of loneliness. Since loneliness is correlated with the expectation of being with others and part of a community, research found that people in collectivistic cultures are lonelier than those in individualistic ones. Ethnicity also contributes to the development, and was thus reviewed. While it being an essential part of being human, loneliness can, indeed, be attenuated and its pain lessened, and culture may predict ways of doing so.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, we have all experienced loneliness at some point in our lives. While most temporary bouts of loneliness usually resolve on their own or are addressed by taking action, prolonged and chronic loneliness may require professional intervention. Loneliness was found to be correlated with a myriad of detrimental concerns, which may include inconsistent sleep, cognitive disruptions, a general malaise, and negative effects impacting physical health and even heart conditions [1,2]. Loneliness was found to be associated with increased mortality risk and depressive symptoms [3], but was also observed to affect the lonely physiologically, physically, and neurologically. It was found to be correlated with a compromised immune system, heightened blood pressure, increased inflammation, and even hasten the development of Alzheimer's disease [1,4-6]. It is of great significance that we, as a society, find the causal contributing factors of loneliness, so that we can aim at controlling its frequency and duration. Culture was found to be one of the factors that may enhance loneliness, or help attenuate it. This brief review is dedicated to the contribution of culture to loneliness.

## Culture

As the Basic Behavioural Science Task Force indicated [7], "social, cultural, and environmental forces shape who we are and how well we function in the everyday world. The culture we belong to, the neighborhood we live in, and the demographic composition of our community" (p. 722) all greatly affect our mental health, adjustment to daily demands, and our approach to loneliness. Segall, et al. [8] reviewed the interaction between psychology and culture, Segall, et al. [8]

asserted that "culture and all that it implies concerning human development, thought and behavior should be central, not peripheral in psychological theory and research" (p. 1108). Triandis [9], emphasizing humans' egocentric point of view, suggested that people in the West, tend to believe that the psychological theories that they developed are universal, while the USA for instance is individualistic and the African culture is collectivistic. Shweder and Sullivan [10] and Doherty, et al. [11] pointed out that cultural and ethnic differences must be considered when designing research if we want it to apply universally [12].

Although, as Bohgle [13] observed, most loneliness research was conducted in industrialized nations, it is obvious that the negative effects of loneliness are felt regardless of the culture in which it occurs, though there may be some cross-cultural variations in the experience of loneliness [14,15].

In Christian and Jewish cultures, the earliest reference to loneliness had been also the first thing God had regarded as 'not good', and that heralded the creation of Eve [16]. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher announced that "he who is unable to mingle in society, or who requires nothing, because of sufficing for himself, is not part of the state so that he is either a wild beast or a divinity" [16].

Rook [17] observed that loneliness is in essence a subjective experience, although it is shared by all humans, that

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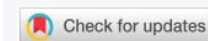
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is influenced by personal and situational variables. It follows then, that cultural and societal norms influence the expression and experience of loneliness.

McHugh Power, et al. asserted [18] that any attempts to define loneliness would not be complete without considering the culture from where the individual came, as they observed, levels of loneliness appear to differ in different cultures. In their study, Hansen and Slagsvold [19] explored the loneliness experience of 33,832 Europeans, aged 60 - 80 from eleven countries. They found significant between-country heterogeneity in loneliness in old age, particularly so among women. In Eastern Europe, 30% - 55% of men and women reported severe loneliness, compared with 10% - 20% among those from Western and Northern Europe. Hansen and Slagsvold [19] explained differences in societal wealth as well as cultural norms may be responsible for some of the unexplained variance in loneliness. "In familistic cultures" they observed "people tend to emphasize and expect strong ties within the family and community. Such cultures may prevent loneliness by promoting social integration. However, as others have noted... the high expectations of strong ties may increase feelings of loneliness if these expectations are not met" (p. 446). Furthermore, Hansen and Slagsvold [19] found weak family and community ties in Northern while the Mediterranean and Eastern European countries promote stronger familial ties. More people live alone in individualistic cultures, there is increased divorce there, and family size is declining. These facts support the findings that in Northern Europe there are high levels of social alienation and loneliness [20].

McHugh Power, et al. [18] noted that the explorations of the arousal of loneliness as a result of the actual and desired levels of loneliness differ, and do not take into account the effect that culture has on our cognitions which give rise to the experience of loneliness. For instance, they note, that collectivist cultures, which focus on person-to-person connections, bring about a more emphasized expectation of social intercourse than individualistic cultures and so, the person in a collectivistic culture who may be living by herself is likely to experience loneliness more so than a person who is alone in a culture which perceives aloneness as a common way of life. They, consequently, concluded that loneliness perception differs according to one's culture and expectations of social connectedness [21]. Further, they noted that "the relationships between social context and loneliness seem to vary cross-culturally. The high prevalence of living alone appears to be related to less loneliness across European countries, moving from north to south.... This is thought to be due to the differing expectations common to northern and southern countries: in southern countries, it is relatively uncommon to live alone, while in more northern countries it is more common" (p.395).

Lykes and Kimmelmeier [22] examined how loneliness is perceived and experienced in various European societies.

He found that in collectivistic cultures there are higher levels of loneliness than in collectivistic compared with individualistic societies. In collectivistic societies, once there was less or a lack of interactions with family, that situation was perceived as. Conversely, in individualistic societies, it was lack of friends or a confidant specifically was more closely linked to loneliness. Findings seem to support the notion that autonomy and choice of one's interactions with one's partner have more significant implications for mental health in individualistic societies, whereas we can find stronger social bonds in collectivistic societies. According to Hofstede (2001), individualism which is closely related to loneliness, is characterized by appreciating and searching for autonomy and placing a high value on an individual's goals. Collectivism, on the other hand, places a high value on the interests of a person's in-groups (such as one's family or community) as more valued than those of oneself.

Markus and Kitayama [23] proposed a theory of self-construal and examined it compared to the American and Chinese cultures. They observed that American culture tends to see the person as independent, whereas the Asian collectivistic cultures perceive themselves as interdependent. Independent self-construal sees the person as a separate entity from others possessing unique qualities and traits that are consistent, with individuals wishing to uphold their independence and express themselves uniquely [23]. Interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, highlights the community, and the individuals as they are connected to others, resulting in the social context influencing their behavior. Exploring the culture-loneliness connection, Rokach, et al. [14] concluded that North Americans, as an individualistic culture, are more poignantly aware of their contribution to experiencing loneliness. Especially when compared to their Spanish counterparts. Anderson (1999) looked at how Chinese people experience loneliness. Chinese feel, apparently, lonelier than Americans, and blame themselves if they are unsatisfied with their social network. Americans were found to be less likely to take responsibility for their loneliness and tended to blame external factors if their social network was not up to their expectations.

Lykes & Kimmelmeier [22] compared several cultures, rather than one individualistic and one collectivistic. Their results indicated that: (a) older adults in collectivistic cultures are lonelier than those in individualistic cultures. (b) culture seems to moderate the frequency of interaction with significant others and its effect on loneliness. In collectivistic cultures, family and friends are highly valued and are seen as central in moderating loneliness. When their support is missing, loneliness is experienced. In individualistic cultures such support is much less expected, and thus loneliness is less experienced. Lykes and Kimmelmeier [22] conclude that "our results confirm that interacting with family and friends differentially mitigates loneliness in collectivistic and individualistic societies, they also supported the idea



of a differential effect for receiving assistance among older adults. Assuming that older adults are most likely to receive assistance when they are no longer able to complete activities of daily living, assistance signifies a declining level of control over one's life.... receiving assistance was associated with more loneliness among older adults in these societies, whereas it was unrelated to feelings of loneliness and social isolation among older adults in more collectivistic societies" (p. 485).

Seepersad, et al. [24] posited that when romantic relationships are seen as important or central in a culture, that may significantly affect loneliness. In the study that Seepersad, et al. [24] conducted, U.S. students experienced higher levels of romantic loneliness compared to Korean students. This finding lends credence to the notion that individualistic loneliness is more related to personal romantic wishes and expectations, compared to loneliness related to social approval in collectivistic cultures (Yum, 2003). In African cultures, for example, loneliness is closely related to social interconnectedness as it is central to the daily thinking and doing of many African cultures [16]. Looking at the Japanese culture, loneliness is experienced within interconnectedness, in such a manner that even when they are desperate to the point of contemplating suicide, the Japanese look for other people who may be suicidal, so that they feel that they do not die alone [25].

Stanley, et al. (2010) examined the experience of loneliness among the Australian elderly. Their results indicated that loneliness was not perceived to be synonymous with social isolation. To summarize, while loneliness and social isolation are related, the former cannot entirely explain the latter.

### **Ethnicity**

In addition to culture, ethnicity, or people's roots are also significant in influencing the experience of loneliness. "International migration is a salient life course transition that may influence trajectories of connections to family, friends, and communities... Migration can affect the likelihood of continuity of relationships with members of one's kin network and the potential for optimizing and diversifying social contacts in the new environment" [26]. In their study, De Jong, et al. [26] examined the loneliness of 3,692 Canadian elderly utilizing the De Jong Gierveld six-item loneliness scale. The factors that influenced loneliness included country of birth, ethnic background, belongingness, and social networks. Results pointed out that only some immigrant groups are significantly lonelier than older adults born in Canada. More precisely, those with similar language and culture to other immigrants are not lonelier; while elderly from countries that differ in native language or culture reported more loneliness. Their research emphasized the importance of cultural background, the person's local participation, and how much one feels a sense of belonging to the Canadian society shedding light on the loneliness of older immigrants.

It should be noted, that as important as they may be, contacts with friends and participation in clubs and organizations are less valued in collectivistic than individualistic societies [27]. De Jong Gierveld, et al. [26] found and confirmed the importance of the sense of belonging and being part of the local community about loneliness. The authors indicated that "In our study, we found a significant interaction effect related to community participation. Non-European immigrants who were less involved in local organizations and clubs were lonelier but not to the same extent as other migrant groups, suggesting that active community participation is not necessarily an important goal for all. "Interestingly they added "having a network of people who speak your native language is significantly associated with higher risks of loneliness. It may be that while such connections are comforting, they keep people focused on culture lost, precluding a sense of strong local embeddedness. Or it may be that such networks are very small and lack the social capital to help connect this immigrant to a broader network of people across a broader geographic space" (p. 264).

Reviewing the Chinese culture Dong, Chang, Wong and Simon, et al. [28] explained that Confucian teachings which significantly influence the Chinese culture, set up standards for one's role and responsibility when relating socially, and those social relationships form a supportive network that connects people. However, when people immigrate, there is usually a disruption in traditional social relationships. That accounts, for instance for the difficulty that U.S. Chinese older adults have difficulty maintaining desired social relationships. Looking at the acculturation process of these people in the USA, Dong, et al. [28] asserted that Asian Americans as they age are significantly affected by mental health issues and emotional distress. Social isolation and unfulfilling connections with significant others are important psychosocial stressors concerning older Asian Americans. They found that up to 80% of Chinese older adults are foreign-born, and more than 30% of Chinese elderly immigrated to the USA after the age of 60. They were found to be more depressed and more suicidal than the general U.S. population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

Research on Chinese elderly, living in China, indicated that loneliness for them was greatly related to the importance of intergenerational relationships, which the Chinese culture values and emphasizes [29]. Being mistreated by a family member, who may be providing support to the elderly, is a significant risk factor for loneliness of those people [30-33].

### **Conclusion & future directions**

Loneliness is, indeed, influenced by the culture one lives in, and, interestingly, collectivistic cultures where people are surrounded by others and by a community, enhance loneliness when that community is not part of one's life. Individualistic cultures do not focus on the community's support, and lack thereof is less expected to arouse loneliness. These findings,



regarding culture, ethnicity, and loneliness, need to be taken into consideration when programs to cope with and reduce loneliness are implemented, particularly with immigrants and newcomers to a country.

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