

edited by Miłosz Hodun

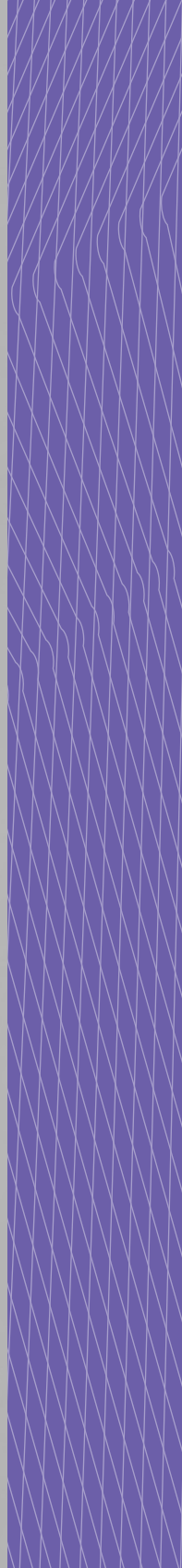


*Lonely  
Europeans*

the impact of loneliness  
and isolation on the  
future of europe

*Liberals could contribute to the increase of public sensitivity and understanding of key issues of loneliness and belonging, social isolation, connectedness and social inclusion, in particular: to raise awareness of the existence of the problem of loneliness and social isolation as important health, social, economic and political issues; to enhance health and social services and supports; to support innovative solutions that foster connection, a sense of community and social integration.*

Felicita Medved



*Lon=ly  
=urop=ans*



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# *Lonely Europeans*

the impact of loneliness  
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## Loneliness is on the horizon

Abir Al-Sahlani MEP

**A**lmost two million out of Sweden's 4.8 million households are single households, consisting of a person who lives alone, without children. In Sweden, there is more living space per person than in most other countries.

Living alone does not necessarily mean that one is lonely, but it might indicate that there is, in fact, a greater risk of loneliness. Especially in a secular society like Sweden, with a well-developed welfare system, where you usually end up in a retirement home when you get old - seeing your family only every so often.

Involuntary loneliness and social isolation for people over the age of 75 years is a growing societal problem. We are talking about a reduced circle of acquaintances, but also inaccessible housing and an unsafe local environment that brings about the risk of people being isolated in their homes.

Research in Sweden, however, shows that teenagers are just as lonely.

We are only scratching the surface.

We are gruesomely aware that during the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness became widespread throughout all age groups - an issue for both men and women. In Belgium - as well as in many other European countries - we suffered severe lockdowns, with the state telling you who you could see, where you could go - making it impossible to travel between countries. Keeping families and loved ones apart.

Violating basic human rights.

Some of us are still living with the consequences. Missing a person who chose to end their life because of loneliness as

a contributing factor or knowing someone who struggles with mental illness.

Politics was, dare I say, one of the main causes of loneliness for many people.

It still is.

Furthermore, we know that social isolation is interconnected with unemployment, poverty and drug and alcohol abuse.

Loneliness poses a lot of challenges for us policy makers. Many of which, unfortunately, still remain blind spots. There have been more pressing political matters on the table, stealing the spotlight from the silent loneliness in society. Nonetheless, dealing with the different reasons for unwanted loneliness in society is of growing importance. Every life matters.

Liberalism often speaks of freedom and the possibility for everyone to reach their full potential. Politics can be a “door opener” for that potential.

So let’s turn the blind spots into knowledge.



## Lonely Europeans

Milosz Hodun

In Japan, the business of hiring people to play friends or family members has been booming for several years. Upon payment and acceptance of the terms and conditions (including the prohibition of touching), one can have coffee or go shopping with such a companion; if desired, he or she will pretend to be the customer's son, mother or grandson.<sup>1</sup> Something that, to many, sounds like a bleak scene from a dystopian futuristic film is becoming a reality. For now, only in Japan, which researcher Junko Okamoto, author of *Japan's Old Men are the World's Loneliest*, calls the 'loneliness superpower'.<sup>2</sup> According to Anata no Ibasho research, 37.3% of Japanese over 20 years old feel lonely.<sup>3</sup> Concepts such as *hikikomori* (total withdrawal from society and seeking extreme degrees of social isolation and confinement)<sup>4</sup> and *karoshi* (overwork death) were born in the land of the rising

1 Roc, M. (2017, November 7). How to Hire Fake Friends and Family. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2017/11/paying-for-fake-friends-and-family/545060/>

2 Okamoto, J. (2020, September 3). A Prescription for Loneliness: Overcoming the Isolation of Japan's Middle-Aged Men. *Nippon.com*. <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00604/>

3 Nearly 40% of people feel lonely in Japan amid pandemic (2022, March 19). *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/03/19/national/social-issues/loneliness-survey-pandemic/>

4 The government has estimated Japan's population of hikikomori aged 15–64 to be 1.15 million, but some specialists believe the hikikomori population could eventually top 10 million. *Read more: Japan's "Hikikomori" Population Could Top 10 Million*. (2019, September 17). *Nippon.com*. <https://www.nippon.com>

sun and have made their way to other countries, becoming a permanent fixture in the vocabularies of psychologists and social scientists.<sup>5</sup>

Japan is the infamous leader in loneliness and lonely deaths, which is facilitated by its rapidly ageing population (marriage rates are decreasing, fertility rates are low), work-life imbalance, and a high number of single-person households (which could rise to 40% of the population by 2040).<sup>6</sup> However, it is also in the vanguard of finding solutions to loneliness. Japan is developing alter-ego robots, virtual wives, mechanic substitute children, therapeutic robot seals for care homes, AI services for the lonely elderly, and robots cleaning the flats of people who died alone...<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Japan is not just about technical curiosities – they are also trying to find systemic solutions. In 2018, the Ministry of Loneliness was established in Tokyo. At first, as a single-person unit to develop strategies to prevent loneliness, depression and suicide. The Japanese government has also set up a task force to address loneliness in the legal system and support the minister. On taking office, Minister for Loneliness Tetsushi Sakamoto announced that he began his role by considering how isolation can be understood before introducing any policy measures.

[com/en/japan-topics/c05008/japan%E2%80%99s-hikikomori-population-could-top-10-million.html](https://www.bbc.com/en/japan-topics/c05008/japan%E2%80%99s-hikikomori-population-could-top-10-million.html)

- 5 E.g. Macedo, P., et al. (2017). Hikikomori goes global: A Portuguese case. *European Psychiatry*, 41 (1). Malagón-Amor, Á., et al. (2015). Hikikomori in Spain: A descriptive study. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 61 (5), 475–483. Ledonne, G. (2022, June 10). ‘Why is hikikomori affecting so many young Italians?’. *Italics Magazine*. <https://italicsmag.com/2022/06/10/why-is-hikikomori-affecting-so-many-young-italians/>
- 6 McElhinney, D. (2022, February 25). Frankly, Here is the Root of Loneliness in Japan. Tokyo Weekender. <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2022/02/the-plight-of-loneliness-in-japan/#:~:text=Work%2Dlife%20imbalances%2C%20rising%20suicide,the%20population%20across%20all%20demographics.>
- 7 Sharma, B. (2021, December 8). Japan’s Fighting Loneliness With ‘Alter Ego Robots’ For People With Social Anxiety. *India Times*. <https://www.indiatimes.com/technology/news/japan-alter-ego-robots-556211.html>

He primarily oversees different departments to address loneliness and establish a standard to measure levels of solitude.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, before Japan, a similar office was established in Europe, specifically in the UK (also in 2018). The Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May, announced the creation of a cross-departmental strategy to help lonely people, which was preceded by a report from a committee chaired by Labour MP Jo Cox, who was murdered in 2016.<sup>9</sup> By decision of the head of government, the minister for sport and civil society became also the minister for loneliness. ‘Loneliness is the biggest civilisational challenge our country is facing. We also receive a lot of information from other countries, which shows that loneliness is an international problem,’ said the new minister Miriam ‘Mims’ Davies.<sup>10</sup> She pointed to the specific costs of loneliness. Among other things, she referred to a report by the New Economics Foundation, which showed that the private sector’s loss of productivity due to loneliness was estimated at GBP 2.5 billion.<sup>11</sup> Davies praised her government for its reforms in the area of employment law and the creation of a Building Connections Fund aimed at creating new relationships.<sup>12</sup> The projects from the new ministry

8 Khan, Z. (2021, April 26). Japan’s Growing Loneliness Issue. *A News Education*. <https://www.anewseducation.com/post/japan-loneliness-issue>

9 [https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness\\_commission](https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness_commission)

10 Pantry, L. (2019, February 9). Minister for Loneliness Mims Davies on her own experiences of isolation and tackling “one of the biggest challenges” Britain has. *Yorkshire Post*. <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/health/minister-loneliness-mims-davies-her-own-experiences-isolation-and-tackling-one-biggest-challenges-britain-has-136647>

11 New Economics Foundation (2017). *The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers*. [https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/NEF\\_COST-OF-LONELINESS\\_DIGITAL-Final.pdf](https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/NEF_COST-OF-LONELINESS_DIGITAL-Final.pdf)

12 A framework to improve and connect social services through things like broadening the use of social prescribing – where professionals refer people experiencing loneliness to supports like involvement in the arts or community groups. HM Government. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2018, December 24). GBP 11.5 million fund to tackle loneliness across

were not always obvious, such as the creation of new bus routes to cater for the mobility of lonely people or improving access to new communication technologies. In order to develop highly reliable and valid data, a uniform unit of measure of loneliness was developed based on the University of California's Loneliness Scale - to be used by the statistical office.<sup>13</sup>

At the moment, it is difficult to find similar solutions in EU countries, but it seems that the topic of loneliness is attracting increasing interest among researchers and decision-makers.<sup>14</sup> The former have recognised that loneliness cannot be reduced to an individual's psychological state. Recent research shows that loneliness has extensive mental and physical health consequences, social and economic consequences and, by extension, political consequences. In other words, through loneliness, people's lives become shorter and of lower quality; and loneliness is experienced on various levels - one can be satisfied with the number and quality of social contacts, but at the same time, feel helpless in front of public institutions and rejected in front of the dominant socio-cultural model.

England. GOV.UK <https://www.wired-gov.net/wg/news.nsf/articles/11.5+milion+fund+to+tackle+loneliness+across+England+24122018111000?open>

- 13 The Office for National Statistics has recommended a package of measures: a single, direct question of 'How often do you feel lonely?', and three questions known as the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) 3-item scale for adults: 'How often do you feel that you lack companionship? How often do you feel left out? How often do you feel isolated from others?' These are established indicators that are already in use in the UK and more widely, and will help to build most effectively on what we currently know. HM Government (2018). *A connected society. A strategy for tackling loneliness - laying the foundations for change*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/936725/6.4882\\_DCMS\\_Loneliness\\_Strategy\\_web\\_Update\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936725/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update_V2.pdf)
- 14 A discussion on this topic swept through Germany. An initiative to appoint a commissioner for loneliness in the Senate of Berlin failed. Stefannello, V. (2019, October 19). Lonely in Berlin: German capital mulls Commissioner for Loneliness. *EuroNews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/18/lonely-in-berlin-german-capital-mulls-minister-for-loneliness>

If we accept that loneliness is a complex, multidimensional problem affecting the well-being of entire societies and the development of countries, we need to start taking action. And if we recognise this phenomenon at a time of its unprecedented severity, such as the time of the pandemic and its constraints, we must give these actions a top priority.

Action taken against the 'loneliness epidemic' must be comprehensive. It is not only investment in psychological and psychiatric assistance, which seems most natural here. It is not only increased care for the oldest or most economically excluded citizens. It is also measures such as better planning for urban development, building a more inclusive educational system or designing digital capitalism more wisely. I do not know if a ministry of solitude is the most optimal solution, but cross-sectoral coordination of all public authority activities is necessary to effectively tackle a challenge that will only intensify in the years to come.

The problem of loneliness has also been recognised by the European Union. The Joint Research Centre (JRC) has been working on the topic of loneliness since 2018, when it first analysed the incidence and determinants of loneliness in Europe. In 2021-2023 a broad series of activities have been taking place in the context of a European Parliament pilot project on monitoring loneliness in Europe. The European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, in collaboration with the JRC, carries out a number of tasks, including the collection of pan-European data on loneliness, a review of existing literature and identification of knowledge gaps, and the establishment of a web platform to monitor loneliness over time and across Europe.<sup>15</sup>

The JRC reports reads: 'Loneliness has now come to be recognised as a serious policy problem, and it has become even more

<sup>15</sup> Baarck, J., et al. (2021). *Loneliness in the EU. Insights from surveys and online media data*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC125873>

relevant in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, as people have been confined to their homes for extended periods of time and unable to pursue their social lives as before. (...) [L]oneliness compares to obesity and smoking in its mortality risks. Loneliness is associated with physical and psychological health problems, as well as lower cognitive performance and risky behaviours. (...) Loneliness is not a new phenomenon, but the mobility restrictions and social distancing measures adopted to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have made the issue even more critical.’<sup>16</sup> The report explored how loneliness evolved during the pandemic, as compared to previous years, for Europeans of all ages. It also shows how public interest in the issue has grown. One in four EU citizens reported feeling lonely most of the time during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic. This is more than double the levels of loneliness reported in a similar survey conducted in 2016. And it is young people most affected by social distancing and quarantining measures. The share of 18-25-year-olds who reported feeling lonely was four times higher in April-July 2020 than in 2016. Among other age groups, reported loneliness also increased, but not to the same extent. The main findings of the report are the following:

- Being single is associated with a higher impact of social distancing measures on loneliness. The share of people living alone who reported feeling lonely grew by more than 22 percentage points compared with 2016 levels. For those living with a partner and/or children, the increase was nine percentage points;
- Loneliness is affecting all regions of Europe, with reported loneliness levels of between 22% and 26% across regions. This is in contrast to pre-pandemic times when loneliness was lowest in northern Europe (6% reported feeling lonely in 2016);

<sup>16</sup> Baarck, J. (2021).

- One-third of media reporting on loneliness and social isolation discusses their relation to health. Media reporting on loneliness also mentions its economic impact, however, less frequently (10% of articles). This reporting also focuses mainly on the impact on young people and women;
- Both media reporting and awareness of the issue of loneliness vary widely from EU Member State to Member State. In some countries, media reporting is extensive, while in others, it is very rare or even non-existent. The same is true for local and national authorities taking measures to tackle the problem.

European Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, Dušica Štěrbová, commented on the JRC report with the following words: ‘The coronavirus pandemic has brought problems like loneliness and social isolation to the fore. These feelings already existed, but there was less public awareness of them. With this new report, we can start to better understand and tackle these problems. Together with other initiatives, like the Green Paper on Ageing, we have an opportunity to reflect on how to build together a more resilient, cohesive society and an EU that is closer to its citizens.’ Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, added: ‘Loneliness is a challenge that is increasingly affecting our young people. But to address any challenge effectively, we first need to understand it. Our scientists at the Joint Research Centre are providing valuable insights into loneliness and how people have been impacted by the pandemic. This new report gives us a baseline for broader analysis so that loneliness and social isolation can be fully understood and addressed in Europe.’<sup>17</sup> It seems that the problem has already been quite well identified, but it definitely has not been properly addressed.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission (2021, July 26). New report: Loneliness doubles in Europe during the pandemic [news announcement]. [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26_en)

The problem of loneliness is also recognised by European liberals, who seek solutions in the spirit of European cooperation, respect for freedom, paying special attention to young people and believing that technology is not only part of the problem but also the key to its solution in modern Europe. This is the focus of this publication.

In the first chapter, Joost Roselaers, until recently editor of *Idee*, the magazine of the social-liberal think-tank Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting, explains why liberals should be concerned with the topic of loneliness at all. Roselaers points to the need for a politics that reaches out to the transcendent, provides a sense of community and is able to look beyond one term, beyond one generation. Liberals have a duty to pursue such politics and to build a Europe based on values that will make the Union a true community bringing nations and generations together.

In a similar vein, Professor Beatrice Magni of the Centro di Ricerca L. Einaudi analyses the concept of solitude from the perspective of a liberal philosopher. Magni writes that '[l]iberalism should take loneliness to be a symptom of the loss of a common world, a loss that cannot be considered apart from the destruction of the political and relational spheres in the modern era. Politics is, above all, about how we create meaning together and how we can guarantee our freedom. Freedom requires a space of appearance or a public realm in which individuals are able to appear to one another in the fullness of their humanity through speech and action. By reformulating the concept of freedom in terms of the relational space of appearance, we could be led to develop a lived and embodied conception of citizenship that is oriented, above all, by the active participation of individuals in the realm of politics.' Magni looks at the relationship between liberalism and solitude through the eyes of Hannah Arendt, who provides an important frame for interpreting the vulnerability of Western liberal democracies today, and might eventually suggest that liberals can defend a new, unconventional and more normative use of vulnerability itself.



In the next chapter, Michał Sawicki and Michał Tęcza from Instytut Edukacji Równościowej (Institute for Equality Education) of the Projekt: Polska Foundation analysed loneliness as a psychological phenomenon. They point out the subsequent stages of psychology's interest in the subject of loneliness, from the 1970s to the second decade of the 21st century, and the universality of the concept described in all cultures. Sawicki and Tęcza point to the most common causes of loneliness - biological and cultural - and its common symptoms. What is important from the point of view of *policy recommendations*, they also identify ways of counteracting loneliness. They talk about the need to improve the quality of psychological and psychiatric care. They emphasise that '[e]ducation is considered the fundamental tool to tackle the negative effects of feeling lonely. What can be found in the literature on the prevention of loneliness is primarily the improvement of social and emotional skills, for example, teaching children how to initiate, sustain and end relationships in a healthy way, how to understand others, and how to resolve conflicts. It also includes systemic measures, i.e. strengthening social support, understood as appropriate specialised support for children who have lost a parent, whose parents have divorced, or whose parents are unable to adequately develop their social skills.'

Former president of the European Liberal Forum and president of the Ljubljana-based Novum Institute, Felicita Medved, focused on the economic consequences of loneliness. To this end, she has collected data published by government and private institutions from Europe, as well as from the USA and Australia. In particular, she points to the costs associated with health care, which in the Netherlands, for example, necessitates an 8.1% increase in expenditure in this sector. Furthermore, Medved writes that loneliness is a threat to the entire economic system, for example, through increased labour costs. The main direct costs result in increased staff turnover, productivity losses and employee absenteeism. In the United Kingdom, the total annual costs are estimated to be GBP 2,265 per lonely worker. Medved

also does not overlook the role of liberals in finding solutions to loneliness. '[L]iberals could contribute to the increase of public sensitivity and understanding of key issues of loneliness and belonging, social isolation, connectedness and social inclusion, in particular: to raise awareness of the existence of the problem of loneliness and social isolation as important health, social, economic and political issues; to enhance health and social services and supports; to support innovative solutions that foster connection, a sense of community and social integration.'

Ada Florentyna Pawlak from the Polish Transhumanist Association, an expert in artificial intelligence, devoted her article to loneliness in the field of new technologies. Pawlak describes how the creators of the latest technological solutions try to make the relationship between devices and people similar to human relationships. She points out that digitally embodied agents shape the worldview, especially of the Alpha generation - the youngest and struggling with loneliness, growing up in a computer-generated synthetic media landscape. She analyses examples of creations that are more human than humans. Finally, she warns: 'Reality and virtual reality intermingle in experience - the boundaries between the two are fluid and sometimes completely blurred. The illusion of reality rests not in the technology itself but in the users' desire to treat the products of their imagination as if they were real. Artificial humans exist intentionally because the youth want to endow them with existence. While technology can satisfy a range of human needs and users will not feel the difference between reality and its artificially generated copies, it is important to remember that realistic simulations evoke real physiological reactions and specific behaviours and can lead to a loss of a sense of reality.'

The founder of Fragili, an Italian non-profit association that focuses on the fragility of people in all its aspects, Luca Volpe, points to various social groups that are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. He pays particular attention to people who are ill or deprived of their liberty. He compares loneliness to violence.

People who are ‘themselves isolated from institutions and societies that leave them, as we hear in the news, “alone with their fate”. Such loneliness is also in some way equal to violence. This is, in essence, a trait of loneliness linked to the issues of discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of equal opportunities for all, as explained in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution.’ As a lawyer, he seeks a solution to this situation in law, both national and European, as an instrument for building community.

The collection concludes with an article by Julian Kull, chairman of the board of the Liberal Gays and Lesbians North Rhine-Westphalia. It focuses on the loneliness of one of the most threatened communities, i.e. LGBTQIA people. ‘80% of homosexual and transgender students encounter harassment due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 70% even feel threatened at school,’ Kull begins. And he adds that the consequences of social rejection of LGBTQIA people are dire, including high rates of suicide and self-harm. In order to effectively address the safety and well-being of young people, there is a need for programmes at national and local levels, e.g. the creation of low-threshold services in areas of education and recreation, and an unequivocal defence of the law and values at European Union level, e.g. the immediate abolition of so-called ‘LGBT-free zones’ and similarly harmful initiatives of the populist right.

The foreword was written by Abir Al-Sahlani, a Member of the European Parliament, who was born in Iraq and came to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor at the age of fifteen and has been working with excluded groups throughout her life.

Enjoy your read!

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## Lonely Europeans

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## The Loss of Common Ground and Values

Joost Röselaeers

The highest goal for liberals is freedom for all. Over the last decades, liberalism has therefore been a movement of emancipation. Individuals have been freed from social and religious powers that limited their freedom. A lot has been achieved, and this comes with new challenges. Society is indeed more than a sum of individuals. In our European society, a large group feels left alone and not represented anymore. A liberal society needs transcendental values and common ground. Who are we? What binds us together? What do we stand for? It is time to rediscover the rich tradition, stories, and values of liberalism in order to reinforce the common ground of our European liberal societies.

*Lonely Europeans* is the title of this challenging ELF publication. It is a very relevant and urgent topic. Indeed, more and more Europeans feel lonely and socially isolated. In this paper, I would like to focus on what, in my view, is one of the reasons for this loneliness. And that is the existential and spiritual emptiness that many Europeans experience. The feeling of not being heard and not being part of a whole. Fear that our well-being is declining and that our way of life is disappearing. And what can we expect? Liberals need to address this existential and spiritual loneliness too, as it can be the cause of a major social disruption within our societies. Liberals need to formulate answers to fundamental questions about our identity and values.

Time Rebels

I spent my youth in France and Senegal. I attended French catholic schools until the Baccalauréat. In my French high school, led by Jesuits, philosophy and literature played an important role. I was challenged to read essays by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, among many others. This author is mostly known for his wonderful book, *The Little Prince*. In his other remarkable work, *A Sense of Life*, I found an image that has stayed with me ever since and still appeals to me. It is the image of the construction of a cathedral. The cathedral was a project that generations of architects and builders worked on. They were encouraged by the image of the completed cathedral, even though they often would not see the completion of the project themselves. Stone by stone, they built the cathedral. Each stone is invaluable and has a small but significant impact on the cathedral as a whole. A stone (or a group of stones) that discolours or shifts makes the cathedral look different. One stone can make it look more impressive or, on the contrary, uglier. The architect and builders will then be challenged to adapt their plans without losing the idea of the completed cathedral. The different stones will remain a valuable part of the whole.

It was highly motivating to read the book *A Good Ancestor* by Roman Krznaric<sup>1</sup>, an Australian philosopher and one of the founders of the School of Life in London - an educational company that offers advice on life issues. In his book, Krznaric delves into the history and the human mind to show that we can still become good ancestors. Even though we live in the age of the tyranny of the now, driven by 24/7 news, the latest tweet and the buy-now option. With such frenetic short-termism at the root of contemporary crises - from the threats of climate change to the lack of planning for a global pandemic - the calls for long-term thinking become louder every day. But what is it, has it ever worked, and

<sup>1</sup> Krznaric, R. (2020). *A Good Ancestor*. London: WH Allen.

can we even do it? From the pyramids to the NHS, humankind has always had the innate ability to plan for posterity and take action that resonates for decades, centuries, and even millennia to come. If we want to be good ancestors and be remembered well by the generations to follow, now is the time to recover and tap into this imaginative skill.

*The Good Ancestor* reveals six profound ways of learning to think long-term and exploring our uniquely human talents. To my delight, one of the ways that expands our time horizons and sharpens our foresight is called ‘cathedral thinking’! Drawing on radical innovations from around the world, Krznaric celebrates the time rebels who are reinventing democracy, culture, and economics so that we all have the chance to become good ancestors and create a better future.

I often used the idea of cathedral thinking in my conversations with politicians when I was an editor of the magazine of the social-liberal think-tank The Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting (Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation) and as a member of the National Responsible Behaviour Team of D66. It helped me highlight two aspects that I believe are essential for every politician and every citizen. What does the cathedral of our society look like? Who are we (as Dutch, as Europeans) together, what characterises us, and which values (stones) are inextricably linked to us? And secondly, what influence does the politician (the builder, sometimes the architect) have on this? Can he or she provide a slightly different colour to the whole? And if so, what colour is that?

These questions immediately took our conversations to another level. Our conversations were no longer about usual topics discussed in national and European politics. Everyday questions such as: who forms a coalition with whom, how can we trump others, and how do we make sure we rise in the opinion polls? Personal success is measured by opinion polls and social media and no longer by intrinsic and shared values. Authenticity and originality are rarely appreciated anymore. We must deal with many expectations. Could this be the cause of the many



burn-outs in politics? Is this why so many politicians experience feelings of loneliness – as they cannot relate their day-to-day actions to a broader idea? You often feel the energy and inspiration seep away from people who have been involved in politics for a longer period. After a while, little of an original zeal is left. In this climate, politicians are not doing themselves justice. They lose the energy and motivation they once had. And with that, they neglect the cathedral we want to build together.

### Transcendental Values of Europe

Values pull people away from pure self-interest or party interest. They have the power to connect people with one another and with the future. The Jesuits who ran my school used the word ‘transcendent’, ‘which is beyond our own existence’. You associate it directly with the divine, and it certainly has that function in my own life. However, I am mainly concerned with a certain mindset. A mindset that Krznaric also focuses on in his book on being a good ancestor. There is something bigger than my own existence. Emmanuel Macron said about his personal beliefs that he does not believe in God, but he does believe in the transcendent. At my French school, it was also emphasised that ‘La France’ possesses something transcendent. Together we are a part of a larger whole, namely ‘La France’. And that stands for a centuries-long tradition and a glorious future. In the words of Charles de Gaulle: ‘une certaine idee de la France’. On July 14, the National Day of France, Bastille Day, the focus was on the celebration of the spirit of Enlightenment, as well as Liberté, Égalité and Fraternité. But we were also reminded of the fact that these values need to be defended. This was also Macron’s call after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This fight is about our common values. It transcends our existence. It is much bigger than economic interests.

From 2013 to 2017, I was the Minister of the Dutch Church in London. And in Great Britain, I rediscovered the emphasis on the transcendent that I learned during my French youth and

have appreciated since then. At commemorations and festivities, the impressive rituals of the Church of England strengthen the awareness that every Briton is a part of a greater whole. That offers comfort, pride, and perspective. I do not want to romanticise this aspect too much, though! That is what the pro-Brexit politicians have been doing over the last years and is one of the reasons Great Britain left the European Union. People feel proud to be British and, sadly, they have never felt proud to be European. And they have never learned to be so. There is no focus on European values, culture, and civilisation in our educational programmes. The European Union is seen as something far away. It is not about us. There is a strong emphasis on the economic and social benefits of the European Union. But that is not strong enough to be of transcendental value. There is no European cathedral we are building together.

This brings me to my fundamental criticism of the European Union. It is very unfortunate that the European project fails to appeal to that deeper feeling in each of us. We do not feel European, and we are not being taught to do so. Liberals should take account of this lacuna as, from the start, they have been strong believers in the European project. Let liberals assume their responsibilities. Europeans need a sense of belonging, and there is much to be proud of. We cannot live without a deeper purpose and a sense of transcendence.

There is sadly not much to learn on this subject from my own country. In the Netherlands, there is indeed a total lack of awareness of the transcendent, of something that transcends us. There are several reasons for this. The Christian faith has rapidly disappeared from our society. Little has been done to replace it. For many political parties, it is unclear what they really stand for. Much depends on the leader. Being Dutch is hardly ever linked to deeper values. What are the values we really stand for, come what may? That is a missed opportunity because our Dutch history offers many leads. I think of stories of people who stood up for tolerance, religious freedom, and justice and who were open

to the world around them. Values that have shaped us strongly and that we can be proud of. And as Europeans, too - there are many historical events that have shaped our values. They have formed our European identity. As Europeans, should we not say more clearly that these values are, as far as we are concerned, of transcendent value? That they are, as it were, of eternal value, even if they are under public pressure? That we want to pass them on to young generations and let them transform us in all our political actions? That these values form the building blocks of the cathedral that is Europe and which we form together?

### Sense of Belonging

And as liberals, let us defend our European identity and values too! I spent six years of my childhood in Dakar, West Africa. There were very few fellow Dutch people there. But my parents and I felt a deep connection with other Europeans in Dakar. We shared history, culture, and values. In Dakar, I felt European and was very proud to be so! Let us stop defending Europe only as a successful economic and social project. Instead, let us focus on our shared history, culture, and values. That ought to be the transcendental basis of the European Union. We all need this basis, this sense of belonging, in these times when so many Europeans feel lonely and left alone.

If the transcendent is missing, then only one's success remains. The success of the politician and their party. It becomes the main reason for their existence and political involvement. One wants better results in the next election. One wants to get more and more followers on Twitter. Over the last few years, I have often asked the question: what do you, as politicians, really want to achieve? Which stone of our society's cathedral should change colour or place in the coming years? And which cornerstones should be especially cherished and reinforced? These questions are now more relevant than ever because after COVID-19 and considering the war on our continent there is something to build

up again. These questions are relevant as a large group in our European society feels left alone and not represented anymore. A liberal society needs transcendental values and common ground. We need to focus on our European identity. People do not feel heard. There is no sense of belonging anymore. There is no focus on what is greater than our own lives. Liberal politicians should take account of this and focus on the bigger picture, the cathedral. That should happen on the national level. And certainly, on the European level too, as the European Union will become more and more important. There is also so much we share as Europeans and can be proud of. I would like to challenge politicians to leave consultants who are solely concerned with image creation at a safe distance. And to enter a person-to-person conversation about what you think makes Europe Europe. And which values are inextricably linked to this. And then stand for it! This attitude will be beneficial to the well-being of politicians and European citizens, who feel that they are being left alone. The loneliness of Europeans has an existential and spiritual basis that needs to be addressed by liberal politicians. We need a (new) sense of being and belonging. It will make us proud Europeans again. And the European cathedral that shapes our society will only become more beautiful.

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Liberalism and Loneliness.  
A Philosophical Point of View

Beatrice Magni

*World-alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.*  
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 254

In the systematic review and meta-analysis on the prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries, BMJ states that problematic levels of loneliness are experienced by a significant proportion of the population in many countries.<sup>1</sup> The substantial difference in data coverage between high-income countries (particularly Europe) and low- and middle-income countries raised an important equity issue:

‘Feelings of loneliness set in when a discrepancy exists between one’s desired and one’s actual level of social relationships. Loneliness is a negative, subjective experience closely linked to the quality of social connections. Loneliness is similar to, but distinct from, social isolation, which is defined as a lack of social contacts, and being alone, characterised as being physically removed from social connections. Transient loneliness is a common experience, but chronic or severe loneliness pose threats to health and wellbeing’.<sup>2</sup>

1 Surkalim, D.L., et al. (2022). The prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ*, 376. <https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj-2021-067068>

2 Surkalim (2022).



International estimates for prevalence of loneliness by age groups (BMJ)

In the midst of a global pandemic, we have found ourselves physically cut off from one another, forced into varying degrees of social distancing and isolation. Many of us have felt helpless, unable to act to alter the circumstances. Many of us have felt uprooted from our regular routines and alienated from our shared world. In relation to this condition of loneliness, in this introduction, I will concentrate on two major points:

- I will examine the different meanings and philosophical conceptions of loneliness, providing some clarification on the distinction between ‘isolation’, ‘loneliness’, and ‘solitude’;
- I will highlight how the appeal to our obligations to future generations is one of the most powerful, emotional and

effective arguments available to political and philosophical studies, useful mostly in challenging our liberal commitment and inquiring into the current status of the European Union with reference to the relationship between *vulnerability* and *loneliness*.

This introduction has two main goals: to develop a theoretical framework grounded on political philosophy able to address and suggest theorising principles and pragmatic future practices for a new kind of liberalism, on the one hand; on the other hand, I hope that the present inquiry contributes even to the debate in contemporary political theory by introducing a new voice to critical discourses concerning the assumptions of the liberal political tradition.

### Liberalism and Loneliness

The worldwide expansion of liberal democracy is one of the most important trends in our modern history. Liberalism is a moral conception of how society's political, economic, and social institutions ought to function. Although there has never been a full agreement among its proponents or its critics about which specific claims define liberalism or make someone a 'liberal', liberal theory and practice have, nevertheless, often converged in endorsing a range of equal rights protecting individual conscience, speech, association, movement, property, opportunity, economic welfare, participation in politics, and a contractual basis for political authority. Disagreements about the meaning of liberalism are best understood as disagreements about which of these various commitments is fundamental, or most urgent, or how best to fit them into a coherent moral theory.<sup>3</sup> The term 'liberalism' refers to forms of political theory that emphasise the values of liberty

3 Geuss, R. (2002). Liberalism and Its Discontents. *Political Theory*, 30.

for and equality among citizens. In this sense of the term, the standard sense in scholarly and academic discussion, liberalism has long been the dominant theoretical tradition in contemporary political philosophy throughout developed societies. Liberals are particularly concerned with questions such as the following (a non-exhaustive list):

- What defines a just political system among naturally free and equal human beings?
- Who decides, and how?
- How does a just political system balance the need for independence with the fact of human interdependence?
- How should it negotiate disagreement between incommensurable moral and political doctrines?
- When are markets appropriate, and when do they corrupt morals?
- What are the roots of recently resurgent forms of nationalism and populism?
- How did the Cold War, 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008 and Covid-19 affect our understanding of liberal democracies?

Our capacity to exercise sovereign authority over such domains as physical property, privacy, our immediate physical environs, our body, our intellectual context, and so on is reasonably conceived - from a liberal point of view - to be constitutive of a developed sense of self. The liberal political theory - at least from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* to nowadays<sup>4</sup> - has rightly placed great concern and emphasis upon the idea of self-sufficiency, individual autonomy, and upon the capacity for making independent choices. This way of thinking about the individual and the individual agency permeates a great deal of liberal and democratic theory today.

4 Locke, J. (1980). *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis: Cambridge, Hackett.



Since its appearance (Wuhan, December 2019), SARS-CoV-2 and the global emergency that followed have raised theoretical and practical challenges in many areas: medical assistance, public health, economics, social interactions, law and politics. The global crisis that we are all yet enduring has put stress on many aspects of our highly interconnected lives: the tension between globalisation and the national management of the crisis, the harsh constraints over our sociality with other people, the request to trust government and experts in making complex decisions with no time and not always enough information about the virus itself. One fundamental aspect of this crisis seemed to be the lack of any form of certainty. A widespread uncertainty affected agents' ability for rational reasoning, as well as raised concerns about the *vulnerability* of individuals and the legitimacy of political decisions, with wide-ranging effects on people's lives.<sup>5</sup> During the last two years, we were all witnessing public re-evaluations about the theoretical and practical connections between moral, social and political values, guidelines and normative principles, policies' goals and the social role of science and experts.

Since uncertainty - and the consequent search for stability criteria - is one of the most fundamental horizons of the philosophical enterprise, I believe that it is important to start analysing this crisis from the standpoint of social and political theory and, more precisely, I will suggest that Hannah Arendt's analysis of the political loneliness of modern life provides an important frame for interpreting the vulnerability of Western liberal democracies today, and might eventually suggest that we - as liberals - can defend a new, unconventional and more normative use of vulnerability itself. But first, some clarification on the difference between solitude and loneliness is needed.

5 Straehle, C. (ed.) (2017). *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Solitude, Isolation, And Loneliness

Arendt's understanding of loneliness echoes the work of Martin Heidegger<sup>6</sup> and Karl Jaspers<sup>7</sup>. Like Heidegger, Arendt intends to show through her account of loneliness that contemporary man is afflicted by a *peculiar* loneliness, having been set adrift by the technical automation of the world rather than brought together with the world and others by these advances. Like Jaspers, Arendt remains critical throughout her career of the tendency in the Western philosophical tradition to elevate contemplative life above practical life, suggesting that this tendency has kept thinking from thematising human plurality and intervening in the mechanisation of the modern world. Even so, she believes that solitude has an important role to play in political life, enabling individuals who belong to a world to cultivate their capacity for thinking.

Hence, in her discussion of loneliness, Arendt distinguishes herself from both of her mentors, maintaining that the seeds of loneliness can be found in two different but interrelated concepts, namely, solitude and isolation. For Arendt, the principle according to which solitude, isolation, and loneliness are related is the human condition of *natality*, which marks our inherent capacity for new beginnings and constitutes the source of our freedom. Arendt wishes to show through her notion of natality that the distinguishing feature of our humanity resides not in our sameness but rather in the irreducible *uniqueness* that is bestowed upon us by the fact of our birth.

Arendt defines solitude as a temporary retreat from the world, but a retreat that is, nevertheless, indispensable for political life: solitude nurtures our capacity for thoughtfulness, bringing us

6 Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and Time* (translated by Macquarrie, J., Robinson, E.) Oxford: Blackwells.

7 Jaspers, K. (1970). *Philosophy. Vol. 2: Existential Elucidation* (translated by Ashton, E.B.). Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

into relation with ourselves so that we are prepared to authentically engage with others. Conceived as the cradle for thinking, solitude offers a sanctuary from what she describes as the 'contagion of conformity' that threatens our capacity to realise our radical singularity in the context of political life. Yet, solitude, though a necessary aspect or moment of human existence, can only ever play a preparatory role in the full flourishing of human life and is never itself adequate for achieving this end. Because we are relational creatures, we find that, while we may be together with ourselves in solitude, our wholeness and singularity as individuals remain unresolved when we are separated from others. Solitude, Arendt explains, gives rise to the feeling of being 'two-in-one', deflected from our individuality by the dual nature that arises when we have only our conscience to consult.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, while solitude provides the foundation for the activity of thinking, enabling us to stand in an authentic relation to ourselves and those around us, one is always plagued by duality and doubt in the dialogue of thought. To be sure, this duality does not diminish the importance of solitude for cultivating our capacity for thought; on the contrary, Arendt insists that the fragmentation we find in ourselves forms the basis for the reflection we undertake in solitude. Even so, the feeling of being 'two-in-one' that arises in solitude prevents us from authentically appropriating ourselves in our singular and irreducible uniqueness. For Arendt, it is only after our singularity has been illuminated by those around us that we can decide to be ourselves, a decision that is brought to completion when we announce who we are to the world. Hence, while solitude may be necessary for the full flourishing of human life, it can also become dangerous when an individual is severed from a world, or community of others, who are able to bring that individual into relief in their singularity. As we shall see, individuals become susceptible to the dangers

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, H. (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, Harcourt: Brace & Company.

of solitude when they find themselves living in isolation, and increasingly more so as they drift toward loneliness.

Human beings become isolated, Arendt explains, '[w]hen the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed'.<sup>9</sup> Having lost the space that is most proper to human action, isolation keeps individuals from fully realising themselves in their natality. Because human beings are both singular and interdependent, their power and freedom as individuals can only be realised with others in the public realm, or that space in which human beings are able to appear in their singular uniqueness. Hence, the destruction or the withdrawal of the public realm gives rise to isolation, preventing individuals from recognising one another as equally powerful in their singularity.

Through the destruction of the political sphere, isolation renders human beings incapable of fully realising themselves through action, robbing them of the ability to be together and endow the world they have in common with meaning. Capable of seeing themselves and those around them only in their productive capacities, isolation thus makes human beings impotent, leading to a sense of despair over the feeling of powerlessness that develops when one is unable to act in concert with others.

Arendt thus describes loneliness as the anxiety we have over the loss of self, occurring upon being severed from a common world that can confirm the truth of our experience. She explains that this anxiety causes individuals to lose trust in who they are and 'the elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, the capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.' Upon falling into despair over this loss of self and the surrounding world, we become disoriented; loneliness overwhelms us with doubt and uncertainty regarding the truth of our experience in the world, leaving us without a tangible reality in which to ground ourselves.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt (1951).

For this reason, Arendt says, the feeling of loneliness is ‘among the most radical and desperate experiences of man’.<sup>10</sup>

The far-reaching social consequences of Covid-19 have generated a widespread feeling of loneliness, or the overwhelming sense of not belonging to any world at all. Loneliness has thus come to exemplify the basic experience of living together in the modern world, such that individuals find themselves dominated not just by isolation and powerlessness but also by worldlessness and superfluity.

### Loneliness And Liberal Citizenship

Through Arendt’s account of loneliness, we find that the danger involved in losing one’s place in the world also encompasses the broader experience of liberal subjects, who, despite living together in open, democratic societies, find themselves homeless and uprooted by having lost a common world.

If the problem of loneliness is understood as the loss of one’s place in the world, and this loss is a consequence of the destruction of the political sphere in the modern age, then overcoming it involves more than simply extending the rights of liberal citizenship to those who exist outside our circles of inclusion; beyond this, what is called for is a critique of these structures and the very forms of subjectivity that they reproduce. In turning to Arendt’s analysis of loneliness, we therefore find that her own concern for citizenship may be interpreted as forming a basis for a deeper critique of the liberal tradition that remains underdeveloped in her discussion of the right to have rights, but that is, nevertheless, integral to her broader insights concerning the failures and dangers of politics in the modern age.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt (1951).

Beyond the Loneliness  
(And Beyond The Standard)

*We are discussing no trivial subject, but how  
a man should live.*

*Plato, Republic, 352D*

But how do liberal democracies try to uphold and fight for their core practices, norms and values while, at the same time, facing the loneliness that remains at work in modern life, even as we find ourselves increasingly interconnected?

Liberalism should take loneliness to be a symptom of the loss of a common world, a loss that cannot be considered apart from the destruction of the political and relational spheres in the modern era. Politics is, above all, about how we create meaning together and how we can guarantee our freedom<sup>11</sup>: freedom requires a space of appearance or a public realm in which individuals are able to appear to one another in the fullness of their humanity through speech and action. By reformulating the concept of freedom in terms of the relational space of appearance, we could be led to develop a lived and embodied conception of citizenship that is oriented, above all, by the active participation of individuals in the realm of politics.

Arendt's account of loneliness clarifies that her call for the right to be a citizen cannot be reduced to a call for the expansion of our present political structures; on the contrary, it serves as the basis for an entirely new conception of citizenship that is able to return lonely individuals to themselves, the world, and others.<sup>12</sup>

11 Shklar, J. (1989). *The Liberalism of Fear*. In Rosenblum, N. (ed.). *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

12 Berkowitz, R. (2009). *Solitude and the Activity of Thinking*. In Bernstein, R. (ed.). *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Thus, and finally, what is called for in the wake of the political catastrophes of the twenty-first century is a more robust sense of political belonging that can save us from the political loneliness of modern life. Liberalism could start conceiving citizenship in terms of belonging to a space of appearance, which enables individuals to see themselves and those around them in the fullness of their humanity. Citizenship, understood in terms of our responsibility to carry a common world from the past into the future, offers a powerful antidote to the political loneliness of modern life; in returning us to ourselves by bringing us into relation with others, in reformulating the citizen subject in terms of her irrevocable interrelatedness and irreducible singularity, a politics of appearance requires the rehabilitation of the shared reality of a common world. Yet, we are careful to insist that this world is not common or shared because it is grounded in the sameness of a people or a totalising collective. Rather, the common world that comes into appearance is always being negotiated, contested, augmented, and reconfigured precisely because it originates from the speech and action of a plurality of actors.

Not a scientific task, but a political one to the greatest extent, such an intervention thus depends first on developing a politics of appearance, or a politics in which we come face-to-face with one another, engaging directly in the matters that happen between us. Such a model of politics, we think, enables us to become visible to one another, not as entities that are reducible to metrics and algorithms but rather as irreducibly unique and capable of acting against the overwhelming odds of statistical law and probability. How, then, might we think of this in the context of contemporary political life?

A politics of appearance, or a politics that demands of us that we take responsibility for making one another visible in the public realm, requires a different angle of approach, a non-standard and new political approach, one that began with an effort to open spaces for speech and action. Hence, rather than turning to the echo chambers of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, a politics of

appearance would depend on embodied engagement and, with this, mutual courage and trust in those on whom we depend in order to appear in our singularity. While this courage and trust are not required in the anonymous digital spaces of social media, they are crucial for enabling human beings to become visible to one another as members of a shared world. As effective as social media might be for galvanising mass movements, a politics of appearance seeks to attend to the loneliness that such forms of technology can reproduce, demanding that citizens come to see one another as belonging to and responsible for a common world.

This is the significance of Arendt's account: the interplay between commonality and distinctness that is always at stake in human plurality.<sup>13</sup>

Such a conception of politics does not reinscribe a notion of the isolated modern subject into the realm of politics; rather, it assumes that we depend on others to confirm our singularity no less than the reality of the world to which we belong.

It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a single, definitive model of politics that can address this problem. Rather, in turning to the notion of a politics of appearance, I aim only to provide one potential response, while setting the stage for a broader discourse on how we might respond to this problem in contemporary political life. The problem of this loneliness—or the fact that our ability to conquer all distances through technological and scientific advancement has, nevertheless, brought us no nearer to ourselves, others, or the world—has only become increasingly urgent today. What Arendt makes clear, and what perhaps distinguishes her from others who have attempted to address this problem, is her suggestion that attending to this issue depends first on thinking about what we are doing. A task, she suggests, that cannot be considered apart from the rehabilitation of the political sphere of our lives.

13 Gaffney, J. (2016). Another Origin of Totalitarianism: Arendt on the Loneliness of Liberal Citizens. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 47, 1.



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## Psychological Aspects of Loneliness

Michał Sawicki, Michał Tęcza

*Loneliness seems to be such a painful,  
frightening experience that people will do  
practically everything to avoid it.*

Frieda Fromm-Reichmann

Loneliness is not just a term for the state a person can find themselves in. It is also an increasingly widespread problem across the world's entire population. Most importantly, from the psychological point of view, people have no individual traits that would protect them against loneliness. Wars, pandemic, technological development, ageing society - these and many other factors are detrimental to healthy interpersonal relationships. In psychology, loneliness is still not sufficiently researched. Its popularity grew in the 1970s and 1980s due to rapid societal changes, especially the increasing number of lonely urban dwellers, mainly women.<sup>1</sup> Frieda Fromm-Reichmann wrote that people are terrified of loneliness and will do everything to avoid it.<sup>2</sup> Later on, however, psychologists lost interest in this topic. Currently, loneliness is returning to the discourse as a disease of civilisation, a universal social experience.<sup>3</sup>

1 Snell, K.D.M. (2015). Agendas for the Historical Study of Loneliness and Lone Living. *The Open Psychology Journal*, 8, 61-70. <https://openpsychologyjournal.com/contents/volumes/V8/TOPSYJ-8-61/TOPSYJ-8-61.pdf>

2 Lepore, J. (2020, April 6). The History of Loneliness. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/the-history-of-loneliness>

3 Dołęga, Z. (2021). *Biedy i bogactwo samotności*. Warszawa: Difin.

In early 2020, the first measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 forced millions into physical and social isolation, leading to severe consequences of loneliness for many who had never experienced it before, at least not permanently. According to the Eurofound research analysed in the new Joint Research Centre report, one in four EU citizens reported feeling lonely most of the time during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>4</sup> However, the pandemic only confirmed what millions of people from various generations knew already – loneliness is a phenomenon known to all societies. According to Lewis Goldberg's lexical hypothesis, loneliness in its everyday meaning is present in almost all languages of the world. This proves the universality of the concept/problem in multiple culture circles.<sup>5</sup> Its universality, however, does not guarantee thorough research. Although psychology recognises the problem and possible impact of the phenomenon on mental and somatic health, in the official classifications of mental problems, there is still no such illness as 'loneliness'.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of loneliness, biology and psychology go hand in hand. To understand the psychological aspects, we need to start at the beginning and look into the chemical processes occurring in our bodies. Humans are not loners by nature. As a result of evolution, the brain perceives loneliness as a threat, thus triggering stress hormones. Heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar are raised to prepare the body to fight and spend energy. Immunity is lowered. In this regard, loneliness is similar to stress – in small doses, it can motivate us to change and act, i.e. to seek connections.

4 European Commission (2021). *Loneliness in the EU*. [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26_en)

5 Goldberg, L. R. (1993). The structure of phenotypic personality traits. *American Psychologist*, 48 (12), 1303–1304.

6 Legg, T.J. (2019, June 25). Is Chronic Loneliness Real? *Healthline*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/chronic-loneliness#when-to-see-a-doctor>

However, in large doses, it can be detrimental to mental and physical health. Thus, in the area of mental health, it can increase the risk of emotional disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse or even lead to suicide. In the area of physical health, or more precisely somatic, it can lead to heart diseases, cancer, stroke, hypertension, dementia and premature death.<sup>7</sup>

According to the 2018 study by Kaiser Family Foundation, *Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey*, 22% of surveyed US adults and 23% of UK adults report that they often or always feel lonely, feel they lack companionship, feel left out or isolated. What is more, they claim that their loneliness has a negative impact on various aspects of their lives, which are seemingly unrelated to loneliness. The survey results also show that, contrary to popular belief, loneliness does not only affect the elderly. Most people reporting loneliness are under the age of fifty.<sup>8</sup> A 2019 European study on loneliness showed that around 30 million European adults (7%) often feel lonely. According to the analysis, this number rises to 10% in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, France and Greece. The percentage of lonely people is the lowest in the Netherlands and Denmark (3%), Finland (4%), as well as Germany, Ireland and Sweden (5%). Additionally, people with poor health are 10% more likely to feel lonely than healthy people. Unemployment increases the risk by 7%.<sup>9</sup>

7 Leland, J. (2022, April 20). How Loneliness Is Damaging Our Health. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html>

8 DiJulio, B., et al. (2018). Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey. *Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation*. <https://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-in-the-United-States-the-United-Kingdom-and-Japan-An-International-Survey>

9 European Commission (2019, June12). 'How lonely are Europeans?' (news announcement). [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/how-lonely-are-europeans-2019-06-12\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news/how-lonely-are-europeans-2019-06-12_en)

It should be noted that the studies were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically increased people's feelings of loneliness. A European study from 2020 has shown that the percentage of people aged 18–25 who declared feeling lonely has increased four times in comparison to 2016.<sup>10</sup> The data also shows that Eastern and Southern Europeans feel more lonely and socially isolated than Western and Northern Europeans.<sup>11</sup>

### Loneliness as Understood in Psychology

In psychology, it is common to differentiate between two dimensions of loneliness – objective loneliness caused by a social situation and subjective loneliness, i.e. the individual feeling of loneliness regardless of the situation. We talk about objective loneliness in cases of exclusion or separation. It depends on external stimuli, often beyond the control of the person experiencing them. Objective loneliness can be divided into four areas according to the types of intimacy they affect. The first, called community deficit, does not concern specific individuals but the lack of shared values. This is, for example, minority loneliness, which affects people belonging to ethnic, national or religious minority groups, LGBT+ people or people with disabilities. It often correlates with minority stress, i.e. chronic tension caused by a sense of inadequacy and fear of exposure and/or negative evaluation from the majority.<sup>12</sup> Another area relates to the social deficit, i.e. lack of interpersonal contacts and relationships. It refers to contacts at school, work, neighbourhood, sporting activities, or pursuing another hobby. The third area includes a deficit of emotional relationships, i.e.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2021).

<sup>11</sup> European Commission (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Świder, M., Wiśniewski, M. (2021). *Raport za lata 2019 – 2020. Sytuacja społeczna osób LGBT w Polsce*. Warsaw: KPH.

the closest ones – with friends, family, and a partner. It can be caused by a general lack of such relationships or their loss due to separation, death, or abandoned nest syndrome. The last area of objective loneliness, which does not always appear in the classifications, is caused by a sudden change in life and is related to social position. It can be, for instance, loss of freedom, symbolic values, prestige or good name.<sup>13</sup>

Subjective loneliness, or feeling lonely, is the undesirable state of experiencing a lack of relationships combined with unpleasant emotions. Mental health professionals define the feeling of loneliness as a gap between the actual level of social interaction and the level people wish for.<sup>14</sup> It means that a deficit of emotional connections is felt for certain reasons. The feeling of loneliness can be independent of being in an objective situation of loneliness. One can be in contact with many people and feel lonely or, on the contrary, find limited social interaction enough and not feel lonely. There are people who choose to live alone and feel very good about it, sometimes even better than when they were in a relationship. Examples include singles who, despite not having a partner, do not feel a sense of loneliness. These people choose the best model of life for themselves and are able to meet their needs for intimacy differently. As long as the lack of a partner does not make them uncomfortable (and it may never happen), we define it as a healthy strategy from a psychological point of view.

Of course, society can create a certain amount of pressure and outline life standards, including one that can be described as ‘no loneliness’. Social media further creates an image of a happy person involved in several close relationships, including a romantic one. These can somehow create a sense of not fitting in and a feeling of loneliness in people who have previously not felt it

<sup>13</sup> Dołęga, Z. (2021). *Biedy i bogactwo samotności*. Warszawa: Difin.

<sup>14</sup> Leland, J. (2022).

at all or only a little. Hence, the conclusion is that other people not only protect against loneliness but also can be the cause of it.

To summarise, the focus of psychology is, therefore, more on the sense of loneliness and not objective loneliness. The perception of reality and the emotions associated with it are the focus of psychological research, not the situations in which individuals find themselves. Objective reasons for loneliness do not necessarily cause discomfort for the person affected. The feeling of loneliness is a universal phenomenon and regardless of their background, age or gender, individuals can feel, at certain stages of their lives, a lack of meaning, a sense of emptiness and a lack of experiences shared with other people.<sup>15</sup>

### Causes of Loneliness

The life situations mentioned in the description of objective loneliness can, of course, cause feelings of loneliness. Sudden changes and losses in our lives leave a sudden deficit in social needs, which is a serious stressor for the body. However, how we cope with a breakup, the death of a loved one, a move, or a change of environment may depend on the individual's characteristics and resources.

Psychological research on loneliness usually refers to the biological theory of temperament as described by Eysenck. It deals with the dimensions of personality traits while assuming their universality. Eysenck divided personality types according to temperamental traits, which he depicted on a multidimensional graph. At opposite poles of the axis, he described opposing traits: neuroticism - emotional balance, extraversion - introversion and psychoticism - socialisation. Depending on the intensity of each of these traits, a personality type can be defined. In the case of research on loneliness, the most common reference is to

<sup>15</sup> Frankl, V. E. (2021). *Über den Sinn des Lebens*. Weinheim: Julius Beltz GmbH.

the melancholic personality. According to Eysenck's theory, it is a combination of high levels of introversion and neuroticism, as well as (added in later stages of research) a low level of social skills.<sup>16</sup> The melancholic personality is best illustrated using the cognitive-behavioural model – one of the most widely used in current psychotherapy. It describes personality patterns that consist of three main elements: thoughts, emotions and behaviour. The melancholic personality is characterised on a cognitive level by high reflexivity, which can fuel a thought spiral concerning feelings of loneliness, on an emotional level by susceptibility to anxiety, and by low sociability – a behavioural aspect that results in less developed social networks.<sup>17</sup>

Remaining on the subject of personality, the psychopathological view of the term brings us to the disorders classified by the World Health Organization (WHO). The diagnosis includes elements such as constant dependence on others, avoidance of social situations, emotional vacillation or psychopathic personality traits. A sense of loneliness often accompanies personalities classified, following the American Psychiatric Association (APA), due to their specificity into a single group.<sup>18</sup> These include borderline personality or narcissistic personality. The emotional vacillation characteristic of the borderline personality can contribute to feelings of emptiness and loneliness due to the spurning of others and the simultaneous feeling of being hurt. In addition, such individuals have difficulty accepting criticism and often come into conflict with those around them. The result is a lack of stable relationships to fill the emotional deficit. Meanwhile narcissistic individuals are unable to establish deeper

16 Kumari, V., Mitchel, R. (2016). *Hans Eysenck's interface between the brain and personality: Modern evidence on the cognitive neuroscience of personality*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

17 Popiel, A., Pragłowska, E. (2022). *Psychoterapia Poznawczo-Behawioralna*. Warszawa: PWN.

18 Young, J. (2014). *Terapia schematu*. Gdańsk: GWP.



relationships, despite seemingly fitting very well in society. Their interactions are mainly based on superficial politeness and interest in others for the benefit and satisfaction of the narcissist.

It is not only biology that matters. The cultural context and environment in which a person is raised are also important. Already in childhood, the immediate environment models the way people establish relationships, what role they play in a relationship, how they deal with conflict situations and how they fulfil their need for intimacy. Here we move seamlessly to the level of social skills, i.e. the capacity a person manifests in terms of relationships with others. To what extent is he or she able to empathically understand others, follow certain rules and, at the same time, react appropriately to social situations? The level of these skills can translate into meeting the need for intimacy with others. To reiterate: Human beings, as social individuals, are not designed to exist alone. Relationships, however, are an element of life that requires effort to establish and then maintain at an appropriate level. How we establish and maintain relationships often comes from patterns that our environment teaches us early in life. Healthy relationship-building is a skill, not a trait assigned at birth.

## Effects of Loneliness

The feeling of loneliness has a significant impact on our organisms and the way we function. It can influence our social experiences and the way we interpret the world.<sup>19</sup> Let us consider the potential negative consequences of deep and long-term discomfort caused by the phenomenon we are discussing. Although loneliness is not a medical or psychological diagnosis, it is tightly linked to health, physical ailments and increased suicide rates. According to APA,

<sup>19</sup> Campaign to End Loneliness (2020). *Psychology of Loneliness*. [https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Psychology\\_of\\_Loneliness\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Psychology_of_Loneliness_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)

the data on the correlation between loneliness and human health is so significant that in some of the APA publications, the term 'loneliness epidemic' can be found. It is a result of an ageing society and a decline in the interpersonal skills of young people.<sup>20</sup> Suicides and suicide attempts are drastic consequences of helplessness and lack of means of coping with overpowering loneliness. These symptoms are usually diagnosed as mood disorders, which can frequently lead to recurrent depressive episodes.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the cognitive-behavioural model of functioning, our thoughts and emotions, including unpleasant ones, seek an outlet, often in the simplest and most accessible way. In the case of feelings of loneliness and accompanying emotions such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, shame or hopelessness, we very often develop escape strategies. These are behaviours that provide a quick outlet to unpleasant emotions and, at least for a while, allow us not to think about the discomfort.<sup>22</sup> Alcohol, psychoactive substances and gambling are just some of the options for 'coping with discomfort'. Unfortunately, the repetition of these activities to relieve emotional tension is a simple way to develop compulsive behaviour or even addiction. The latter can also be triggered by high levels of stress acting as an incentive to engage in risky behaviour.<sup>23</sup> Many researchers also emphasise that problems in interpersonal relationships, lack of acceptance, peer isolation, emotional coldness or lack of healthy relationships in the family are personality-based causes of addiction.<sup>24</sup> Dangerous escape behaviour of particular interest to psychologists in

20 APA (2017). 'So Lonely I Could Die'. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/08/lonely-die>

21 Kabat, J. W. (2006). *Biologiczne podstawy psychologii*. Warszawa: PWN.

22 Kubitsky, J. (2014). *Vademecum Terapeuty Poznawczego*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ.

23 Jędrzejko, M., Rosik, B., Kowalski, M. (eds.) (2015). *Uzależnienia behawioralne*. Warszawa: Akademia Humanistyczna.

24 Damazyn, M. (2009). *Przyczyny uzależnień*. Toruń: Wychowawca.

recent years, which fits in perfectly with strategies for coping with loneliness, is chemsex, i.e. combining sexual activities with the use of specific psychoactive substances. According to research, most people who practice chemsex experience loneliness and low self-esteem.<sup>25</sup> The Loneliness and Sexual Risk Model (LSRM)<sup>26</sup> shows a correlation between loneliness and engaging in risky behaviour, including in compulsive (intrusive) ways. Such practices are also used by people who experience isolation and real or perceived rejection by society.<sup>27</sup>

The same is true for other behaviours that strongly affect human functioning. Strong stimuli, such as watching pornography or overeating, can distract from unpleasant emotions. Their effect is short-lived, and after a time, the feeling of loneliness returns. It is then necessary to dive back into compulsive behaviour. This mechanism actually sustains a sense of loneliness. It drowns it out temporarily but does not cure it; on the contrary, it can exacerbate this feeling.<sup>28</sup>

The dominance of online life over offline life might be another consequence. Due to the lack of real contacts or insufficient contacts that do not fill the intimacy deficit, further coping strategies are developed. Social media is a great tool to build self-esteem, receive attention and admiration, as well as share information and opinions. The easy access to this tool and no need for real contact seem to be an ideal solution for people who feel emptiness, anxiety and sadness in the offline world. The dangerous consequence, however, is losing oneself in the virtual world.

25 Duwe, J. D. (2018). *Truth about Chemsex*. New Jersey: Bookbaby.

26 Gore-Felton, C., Torres, H. (2007). *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

27 Kowalczyk, R., Stołam, A. (2022). *Chemseks ujęcie wielodyscyplinarne*. Warszawa: PZWL.

28 Hodun, M., Sawicki, M., Tęcza, M. (eds.) (2021). *Good Sex Ed. Sexual Education in Europe between Evidence and Ideology*. Warszawa: Projekt: Polska.

The state of experiencing unpleasant emotions is not without its effects on the body and is often reflected in psychosomatic symptoms. What patients complain about when they report loneliness or depression are headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbances and eating disorders. Lower immunity is also quite common. The reduction in the number of lymphocytes produced by the body is caused by changes in hormone and neurotransmitter levels.<sup>29</sup> According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), chronic loneliness lowers immunity and promotes the development of somatic diseases. 'Loneliness among patients with heart failure was associated with a nearly four-times greater risk of death, a 68% higher risk of hospitalisation, and a 57% greater risk of emergency department visits,' reads the report.

At the same time, according to the *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults* report from 2020, ca. one in four Americans over the age of 65 is socially isolated, significantly increasing the risk of premature death – rivalling smoking, obesity and physical inactivity in this ignominious competition. A report from the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that social isolation is associated with a 50% increased likelihood of developing dementia. Lack of meaningful social relationships is associated with a 29% higher risk of heart disease and a 32% higher risk of stroke.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, a 2017 Trusted Source study found evidence linking loneliness to increased risk of chronic disease, high cholesterol, diabetes, depression and poor sleep quality.<sup>31</sup>

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychology professor at Brigham Young University, also found that loneliness and social isolation

29 Grzeszczuk, L., Suszek, H. (eds.) (2011). *Problemy pacjentów*. Warszawa: Eneteia.

30 Goldstein, A. (2021). The Pandemic of Loneliness. Stories that caught our attention. *California Healthcare Foundation*. <https://www.chcf.org/blog/pandemic-loneliness/>

31 Legg, T.J. (2019).

can be as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and contribute to premature death.<sup>32</sup> Other research shows that those who identify as lonely are 59% more likely to lose their ability to perform daily tasks and are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular problems, obesity, dementia and depression.<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to the consequences of loneliness, it is important to mention the possible intensification of the feeling of loneliness, which is also not without consequences. A person's exposure to prolonged stress, sadness, feelings of hopelessness and isolation can develop into a chronic state of feeling lonely, with a prevailing sense of inability to escape the situation. It is very often accompanied by lowered self-esteem and anxiety, including emerging social anxiety, which impedes finding new friends and beginning the healing process. This results in a kind of vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape on one's own.<sup>34</sup>

### Prevention and Treatment of Loneliness

Although loneliness is not a diagnosable condition, it is possible to receive help and cope with this feeling through therapy. Most often, the process of coping with loneliness depends on what is causing it. However, what is most important in prevention is talking about the problem. Raising the issue of loneliness and the special

32 Frame, S. (2017, October 18). Julianne Holt-Lunstad probes loneliness, social connections. *APA*. <https://www.apa.org/members/content/holt-lunstad-loneliness-social-connections>

33 Leland, K. (2012, June 18). Loneliness Linked to Serious Health Problems and Death Among Elderly. *UCSF*. <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2012/06/98644/loneliness-linked-serious-health-problems-and-death-among-elderly#:~:text=Researchers%2520at%2520UCSF%2520focused%2520on,percent%2520greater%2520risk%2520of%2520decline.>

34 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020). *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

needs of people who feel lonely seems to be the primary prevention mechanism. In addition to addressing the topic in the media and politics, attention should be paid to the school curriculum. Education is considered the fundamental tool to tackle the negative effects of feeling lonely. What can be found in the literature on the prevention of loneliness is primarily the improvement of social and emotional skills, for example, teaching children how to initiate, sustain and end relationships in a healthy way, how to understand others, and how to resolve conflicts. It also includes systemic measures, i.e. strengthening social support, understood as appropriate specialised support for children who have lost a parent, whose parents have divorced, or whose parents are unable to adequately develop their social skills (such a solution has already been introduced in Norway).<sup>35</sup>

When it comes to helping adults who are already suffering from loneliness, individual or group therapies seem most appropriate. Psychological therapy is adapted according to the assessment of the patient's condition, for example, the level of executive dysfunction, emotion dysregulation, and deficits in attention and cognition.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, therapy meetings use techniques appropriate for the level of discomfort experienced but also the patient's abilities and resources. The first ones used are psycho-educational techniques aimed at the patient's understanding of the nature of their problems. Next are cognitive techniques, i.e. working on beliefs about oneself and others. These are often beliefs that belittle the patient and portray others as uninterested in contact, judging or rejecting. Behavioural techniques aim to encourage patients to engage in social experimentation and change behavioural strategies to build or improve relationships.

35 <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/bitstream/handle/1956/22139/Final%2B-Named%2BWord%2BVersion%2B%2528Accepted%2BPapers%2BOnly%2529.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>

36 OECD Education and Skills Today (2021). *How can education help fight loneliness?* <https://oecdutoday.com/how-can-education-help-fight-loneliness/>

Therapists can also provide information on coping with the effects of loneliness and help discover ways of making positive changes. Any therapeutic process can be complemented by psychiatric help and pharmacological support - not for the loneliness itself but for its consequences, such as mood disorders, addictions, sexual disorders, and suicidal thoughts.<sup>37</sup>

Remedies for loneliness should not only be applied directly to lonely people but also to society and the dominant culture. So far, the latter has fostered the development of this phenomenon. It is necessary to increase the importance of interpersonal relationships in the process of personal development and to recognise that fulfilling the need for intimacy has a positive impact on mental health. The challenge in both the prevention and treatment of loneliness is to re-evaluate priorities and redirect attention from professional life to relationships.<sup>38</sup> What can be found in the recommendations of professionals is to remain active, work or volunteer with other people, get to know one's neighbours, choose hobbies which require interaction with others, and go out to places where people meet. If someone is already spending time alone, it is important that they allow themselves to do it their way, choosing an enjoyable activity. It means letting go of duty and focusing on one's own needs.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

According to the WHO criteria, 'health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.<sup>40</sup> The aforementioned studies show that loneliness is definitely disrupting health and becoming

37 Grzeszczuk, L., Suszek, H. (2011). *Problemy pacjentów*. Warszawa: Eneteia.

38 Leland, J. (2022).

39 Legg, T.J. (2019).

40 <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>

a 21st-century problem. The feeling of loneliness most often generates unpleasant sadness. Many people underestimate the symptoms that may arise as a result. The most common symptoms of chronic loneliness are reduced energy, problems with concentrating, insomnia, interrupted sleep or other sleep problems, decreased appetite, feelings of doubt, hopelessness or worthlessness, a tendency to get sick frequently, feeling of anxiety, fears, compulsive shopping, substance abuse, an increased desire to watch TV series or films, a desire for physical warmth such as hot drinks, baths or snug clothes and blankets.<sup>41</sup>

The problem will not disappear if we stop noticing it. Psychological and therapeutic support alone is not enough. It is necessary to follow in the footsteps of Japan and the UK and take meaningful action on institutional and systemic levels. Ministries for loneliness (like the one established by the UK Prime Minister Theresa May in 2017), specialised organisations, thorough research and immediate responses. It is a significant signal for raising awareness among citizens.<sup>42</sup> The aforementioned psychoeducation is part of first-line therapy. Psychology still devotes too little attention to this issue, yet the needs for belonging, acceptance, and closeness create the basis for every model of human functioning. Recent years - the years of the pandemic - have shown how important the problem is and how it has been underestimated for years. Loneliness as a social problem has only recently entered the political and social debates. Many research findings and various data can be cited, but the conclusion is always the same - loneliness is a tremendous and growing problem that must be addressed seriously.

41 Legg, T.J. (2019).

42 <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>



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## All Costs of Loneliness

Felicita Medved

The prevalence of loneliness in the developed world is high, and it has been suggested that we are living in an increasingly lonely society - that loneliness has become the defining condition of our century.<sup>1</sup> Leading experts on loneliness found that around a third of people are affected by this condition, with one person in twelve affected severely.<sup>2</sup> The situation is so serious, some would argue, that we can talk about the *loneliness epidemic*<sup>3</sup> and define loneliness as malaise or even, citing Mother Teresa's quote, *the leprosy of the modern world*. Behind this 'epidemic' lies the socioeconomic, often hidden cost. If sustained and not addressed, loneliness and social isolation have harmful consequences on health. These cause substantial costs for the lonely, which extend to their families, friends and communities, and further on, to society and the economy. In spite of growing concern, specifically because of greater pressure on the health system and expenditure, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (during which the younger generations were the most hit by social distancing and other measures imposed), financial costs of loneliness and long-term consequences are still poorly understood.

1 Hertz, N. (2021). *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart*. New York: Currency.

2 Cacioppo, J.T., Cacioppo, S. (2018). *The growing problem of loneliness*. *Lancet*, 391 (10119), 426. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30142-9)

3 Easton, M. (2018, February 11). How Should We Tackle the Loneliness Epidemic? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-42887932>

This article will define the phenomena of loneliness and social isolation and review data and research indicating their harmful consequences, primarily focusing on the economic costs of loneliness and social isolation that are affecting the whole society. Hopefully, it will assist in providing some answers on what can be done about it.

### Definitions and issues

Loneliness appears to be a timeless, universal experience, though it seems to have originated in the late sixteenth century. Then it signalled the danger created by being physically too far or removed from other people. A lonely space was a place – often in the wilderness – in which you might meet someone who could do you harm, with no one else around to help you. Since then, the concept has transformed and become an emotional state of feeling apart from others without necessarily being so. The wilderness of modern loneliness, and a fear of it, has moved inward, taking up residence in our minds.<sup>4</sup> *Loneliness* is thus highly subjective and, as defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica, a ‘distressing experience that occurs when a person’s social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired’. It differs from *solitude* which is ‘a state or situation in which you are alone because you want to be.’<sup>5</sup> *Social isolation* indicates objectively no or little meaningful contact with others and is generally perceived as a negative phenomenon. Though there is an obvious correlation between loneliness and

4 Worsley, A. (2018, March 19). A history of loneliness. *The Conversation*.  
<https://www.theconversation.com/a-history-of-loneliness-91542>

5 Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.). Loneliness. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/loneliness>; Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.). Solitude. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/solitude>

social isolation, someone who is socially isolated does not have to necessarily feel lonely.<sup>6</sup>

Depending upon an individual's perceptions and circumstances over their life course, loneliness may be *transient* when it involves occasional feelings of loneliness or *situational* if triggered by specific events in life, such as the loss of a partner or moving to a new place. *Chronic* loneliness is a profoundly painful experience over an extended period of time – 'a debilitating psychological condition characterized by a deep sense of emptiness, worthlessness, lack of control, and personal threat.'<sup>7</sup> Loneliness can be *intimate*, when you miss somebody with whom you 'don't have to have any façade', *relational*, when we are missing friendships, social interactions and network, or *collective*, when we miss being part of a community with which we have a shared identity or a common sense of purpose.<sup>8</sup> This means that loneliness can also be a feeling of disconnection from your fellow citizens, from politics and the state; or the dissatisfaction generated by loneliness because you feel rejected by society and ignored by mainstream political forces – *Verlassenheit*, as Hannah Arendt understood it – when loneliness leaves you with no one.<sup>9</sup>

6 Care Connect & Age UK (2018). *Loneliness and isolation – understanding the difference and why it matters*. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters>

7 Cacioppo, J.T., Hawkey, L.C., Thisted, R.A. (2010). Perceived Social Isolation Makes Me Sad: Five Year Cross-Lagged Analyses of Loneliness and Depressive Symptomatology in the Chicago Health, Aging, and Social Relations Study. *Psychology and Aging*, 25 (2), 453–463. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2922929/>

8 Fitzsimons, B. (2020, October 12). There are 3 different types of loneliness. Here's which one you're dealing with, and how to overcome it. *MamaMia*. <https://www.mamamia.com.au/types-of-loneliness/>

9 Stitt, J. (2020, July 19). Isolation, Loneliness and Solitude, Hannah Arendt's Triumvirate. *Tocqueville 21*. <https://tocqueville21.com/le-club/isolation-loneliness-and-solitude-hannah-arendts-triumvirate/>

Growing literature on loneliness frequently uses these concepts interchangeably. Moreover, they can also be related to further concepts such as subjective well-being, social embeddedness, social network, social capital, social support or social exclusion. Due to the inconsistent use of terminology, there are methodological issues pertaining to the concepts and the measurement of loneliness and social isolation, as well as estimations of their economic costs.

Evidence-based research points to an increasing magnitude of loneliness and social isolation in the EU. In 2016, the European Quality of Life Survey found that around 12% of EU citizens felt lonely more than half of the time. Frequent loneliness increased with age, ranging from 9% amongst younger people aged 18-25 years to 15% amongst those aged 65 and more. However, *Loneliness in the EU - Insights from surveys and online media* - one of the comprehensive reports conducted by the European Commission, aiming at creating evidence-based scientific and technical support for possible public policy at the European level - highlights a drastic increase in loneliness during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around a quarter of the adult population reported feeling lonely, twice as many as before and four times as many among people aged 18-25.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to gender, loneliness does not discriminate.<sup>11</sup> There is also no sign of an urban-rural divide in this respect.<sup>12</sup>

10 Baarck, J., et al. (2021). *Loneliness in the EU - Insights from surveys and online media data Publications Office of the European Union*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p.7. <http://doi:10.2760/28343>

11 Men record higher scores when multiple indicators, such as marital status, partner history, socioeconomic factors and social network, are used. Women are more inclined to admit they are lonely when loneliness is self-labelled. Men tend to be more sensitive to the social and cultural stigma that their community of reference attaches to loneliness. See: Maes, M., et al. (2019). Gender Differences in Loneliness across the Lifespan: A Meta-Analysis. *European Journal of Personality*, 33 (6), 642-654. <http://doi:10.1002/per.2220>

12 Loneliness in the EU, p. 14. In regard to area characteristics, higher levels of loneliness tend to be associated with population change related to mobility

The pre-pandemic regional patterns in loneliness levels, however, show considerable differences between northern and other parts of Europe. Around 6% of the northern Europeans felt lonely, compared to 11% to 13% in western, southern and eastern Europe. It has been observed that single-person households are concentrated in the northern European countries – Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (over 40% on average), where people were – perhaps contrary to expectations – less likely to be lonely. This difference is attributed to the prevailing influence of the *normative climate* – dominant cultural norms and values.<sup>13</sup> In family-centred and collectivistic cultures, some scholars argue, levels of loneliness are higher because community-based and interpersonal relationships are central to their normative climate. In such societies, individuals are less tolerant of relational isolation, especially from the family. Societal individualism, on the other hand, may reduce the perception of loneliness by lowering the expectations of what constitutes an optimal level of social and emotional connectedness.<sup>14</sup> Following the COVID-19 outbreak, all regions reported similar loneliness levels between 22% and 26%.<sup>15</sup> Western and northern Europe experienced the sharpest rise in loneliness though having softer lockdowns than southern and eastern Europe. Population characteristics

and objective regional remoteness, and at the neighbourhood level, greater distance from public parks and sport or leisure facilities, as well as perceptions of poor neighbourhood relations. See: Buecker, S., et al. (2021). In a Lonely Place: Investigating Regional Differences in Loneliness. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12 (2), 147–155. <http://doi:10.1177/1948550620912881>

13 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), pp. 14–15.

14 Lykes, V.A., Kemmelmeier, M. (2014). What Predicts Loneliness? Cultural Difference Between Individualistic and Collectivistic Societies in Europe. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 45(3), 468–490. <http://doi:10.1177/0022022113509881>; Swader, C.S. (2019). Loneliness in Europe: Personal and Societal Individualism–Collectivism and Their Connection to Social Isolation. *Social Forces*, 97(3), 1307–1336. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy088>

15 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 31.

and the wider social context can explain this pattern to some degree, as the pandemic might have initially fostered a sense of belonging, particularly in southern Europe.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, being single or living alone has made social distancing measures more painful.<sup>17</sup>

### Economy of loneliness

In regard to economic implications, a study on the *epidemic of solitude*, which distinguishes between two forms of solitude – loneliness and living alone, as well as their influence on the economic performance of European regions at the local level, found that greater shares of people living alone drive economic growth, whereas an increase in loneliness has damaging economic consequences. Though the relationship is complex and non-linear, a region with more lonely people will experience lower aggregate economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

Loneliness and social isolation have negative consequences for health. The effects on health and a plethora of other potential risk factors, including lifestyles and health behaviours, are well documented in the academic literature.<sup>19</sup> Possibly one of the most investigated issues in the field are the potential mechanisms

16 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 34.

17 In general, Europeans living alone experienced an increase in the prevalence of loneliness of more than 22 percentage points compared with levels observed in 2016. Loneliness among those living with a partner and/or children increased by nine percentage points over the same period. See: *Loneliness in the EU*, pp. 23–24.

18 Burlina, C., Rodriguez-Pose, A. (2021), *Alone and Lonely. The economic cost of solitude for regions of Europe. Papers in Evolutionary Economic Geography (PEEG)*, 2133. Utrecht University, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Group Economic Geography. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/egu/wpaper/2133.html>

19 Substantial research on health, including physical health, mental health, cognitive health, brain, biology, and genetics, lies predominantly in the fields of psychology, epidemiology, public health, as well as biology and genetics.



linking loneliness with health and vice versa.<sup>20</sup> It is not always easy to disentangle which triggers which, but there is enough evidence to know that good health protects against loneliness, that loneliness can cause health risk factors, that these factors can cause loneliness, or both can be related to the same cause.

According to a 2016 survey, 8% of Europeans in (self-perceived) good health felt lonely, compared to around 32% of those in bad health. With the pandemic, this proportion rose to 20% and 40%, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the loneliness of people in poor health is largely chronic and probably driven by health-related factors, fewer possibilities to meet with others and less social support, rather than by the lower income or labour market status of those in bad health, for example.<sup>22</sup>

In general, people aged 50 or older are more likely to experience many of the risk factors that can cause or worsen social isolation and/or loneliness, such as living alone, loss of family or friends, chronic illness, or cognitive decline. They face substantially increased health risks of premature death (26%), a risk that may rival smoking, obesity and physical inactivity; about a 50% increased risk of dementia, a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.<sup>23</sup> Lonelier young adults are more likely to develop poor mental health, maladaptive health behaviours, poor sleep efficiency and lowered ability to cope with stress.<sup>24</sup>

20 For a review of the emerging academic literature on this topic and summaries of individual studies refer to: Baarck, J., Kovacic, M. (2022). *The relationship between loneliness and health*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <http://doi:10.2760/90915>

21 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 34.

22 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 26.

23 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663external icon>

24 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 13.

Consequently, lonely people are much more likely to use health and social care services, increasing pressure on the health system and healthcare resources, including financial costs. Lonely elderly people visit physicians more frequently and have a higher rate of admission to hospitals, as well as a longer period of hospitalisation.<sup>25</sup> In addition, lonely young people also have poorer employment opportunities and are at greater risk of facing financial problems.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, loneliness is increasingly recognised as a public health issue and, undoubtedly, also an economic one. Nevertheless, research on the costs that could be attributed to loneliness and social isolation is scarce and mainly limited to countries that have already identified loneliness as an issue of public concern. Attention has been primarily paid to financial costs in terms of healthcare expenditure, the cost-effectiveness of interventions and, to a lesser degree, the employer cost of loneliness. The costs of other economic implications of loneliness and social isolation have hardly been considered.

Financial costs related to loneliness in healthcare expenditure are significant.<sup>27</sup> In the case of the United Kingdom, possible lifetime costs associated with loneliness are estimated to be GBP 3.6 million for a cohort of 5,000 lonely people.<sup>28</sup> A report by the London School of Economics conservatively estimated

25 *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults*, pp. 123–130.

26 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), p. 13.

27 The growing problem of loneliness: Kunz, J.S., Shields, M.A. (2021). Economic Aspects of Loneliness in Australia. *The Australian Economic Review*, 54 (1), 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8462.12414>; Mihalopoulos, C., et al. (2020), The Economic Costs of Loneliness: A Review of Cost-of-Illness and Economic Evaluation Studies. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 55(7), 823–836. <http://doi:10.1007/s00127-019-01733-7>

28 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2021). Employers and Loneliness. Government of the United Kingdom. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employers-and-loneliness/employers-and-loneliness>

that the potential health and social care costs of loneliness for adults aged 65 and more were in excess of GBP170 per annum; for the most severely lonely, the potential costs were in excess of GBP 600 per annum.<sup>29</sup> In the United States, social isolation was found to account for an additional USD 6.7 billion of Medicare spending each year, or USD 1.608 more on healthcare costs for socially isolated persons over 65 years.<sup>30</sup>

In the Netherlands, according to the estimations by Meisters et al. (2021), loneliness is to increase total healthcare expenditure by 1% (EUR 435.4 million) directly and by 8.1% (EUR 3.5 billion) indirectly. It accounts for 10.3% (EUR 340.2 million) of annual Dutch public mental healthcare spending. The study is also the first to reveal distinct associations of loneliness and healthcare expenditure across various age groups. It clearly indicates that severe loneliness is associated with relatively higher expenditure in younger adults (19–40 years) compared to older age groups, particularly for mental healthcare. This is consistent with researchers reporting that younger generations experience higher stress levels in today's more individualistic, high-performance society.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, an Australian study estimated the annual economic cost of loneliness in relation to adverse health behaviours. These account for around AUD 2.7 billion, equivalent to

29 McDaid, D., La Park, A. (2020). Modelling the Economic Impact of Reducing Loneliness in Community Dwelling Older People in England. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (4), 1426. <http://doi:10.3390/ijerph18041426>

30 Flowers, L., et al. (2017). Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults. Insights on the Issues. *AARP Public Policy Institute*. <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2017/10/medicare-spends-more-on-socially-isolated-older-adults.pdf>.

31 E.g. Meisters, R., et al. (2021). Does Loneliness Have a Cost? A Population-Wide Study of the Association Between Loneliness and Healthcare Expenditure. *International Journal of Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2021.581286>

an annual cost of AUD 1,565 for each lonely person. The most significant contributions to these overall costs come from the greater incidence of regular smoking, the higher number of GP visits, physical inactivity and excessive alcohol consumption. More than half of the overall costs of loneliness (59%) come from the impact on women; and women younger than 25 years old account for more than three quarters (78%) of these costs within their cohort. People aged 55 and older account for more than a third of the economic costs of loneliness associated with GP and hospital visits, as well as physical inactivity.<sup>32</sup>

Studies on financial evaluations of the interventions to reduce loneliness and social isolation - mainly targeting older populations in the United Kingdom - show that they were likely to be cost-effective and possibly even cost-saving. The most promising interventions included increased social contact, such as befriending, peer visiting and similar.<sup>33</sup> This implies that new policies or societal programmes addressing loneliness may have the potential to significantly reduce healthcare expenditure, particularly in mental healthcare. Namely, experts agree that interventions - to be efficient and cost-effective - should target beyond older populations and be tailored to different experiences of loneliness, life circumstances and preferences among younger generations and other lonely groups, such as disabled people, migrants, LGBTQI, etc.

Furthermore, loneliness threatens the economic system as well. The costs of loneliness to employers can be substantial. The yearly cost of loneliness to UK employers could be GBP 2.5 billion, with GBP 2.1 billion of this falling on the private sector. The main direct costs result from increased staff turnover, productivity losses and employee absenteeism. The total annual

32 Duncan, A., et al. (2021). Stronger Together, Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia. *Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre*. [https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2021/11/139532\\_BCEC-Stronger-Together-report\\_WEB.pdf](https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2021/11/139532_BCEC-Stronger-Together-report_WEB.pdf)

33 Cacioppo, J.T., Cacioppo, S. (2018).

cost is estimated to be GBP 2,265 per lonely employee. The New Economics Foundation puts these figures in context - they represent about 8% of the annual cost of mental ill-health born by UK employers.<sup>34</sup> Apart from the direct financial costs, loneliness represents a threat to the correct functioning of economic and financial systems, as it decreases interpersonal trust, which is fundamental for fruitful economic exchanges.<sup>35</sup>

Conclusively, loneliness is becoming a feature of our societies which is increasingly identified as a matter of public concern. Apart from worries about widespread psychological distress and loneliness in the context of policies imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and their possible long-term consequences, a plausible reason for this concern may be related to emerging societal trends affecting the way we relate, communicate, and function in our social environments. Over the last four decades or so, there have been significant and largely simultaneous societal, economic and cultural changes. In spite of their many benefits to both individuals and society, they have contributed to widespread feelings of loneliness. Although it is not supported by enough academic research yet, loneliness is attributed to demographic changes, growing urbanisation, spatial planning and design, fragmentation of families, an increase in single-member households, and structural changes in the community and the workforce. The rise of advanced technology is often cited as playing a central role (both positive and negative) in the emerging *loneliness economy*. We can connect with people from all over the world, yet at the same time, we might become lonelier.

34 In addition, about 10% of UK workers are also carers outside of work and additional cost to employers as it relates to loneliness was estimated at £73 per working carer. Jeffrey, K., Abdallah, S. & Michaelson, J. (2017). *The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers*. London: New Economics Foundation. <https://neweconomics.org/2017/02/cost-loneliness-uk-employers>

35 Cuccu, L., Stepanova, E. (2021). *Loneliness & social and civic behaviours*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <http://doi:10.2760/802268>, JRC126983

There are concerns about increasing social anxiety and the exploitation of loneliness in the digital world.

Finally, the competitive mindset of the neoliberal ideology and the celebration of self-reliance might have also played an important role.<sup>36</sup> In this framework, it is surprising how little research has been done on the economics of loneliness. Favourable economic circumstances – just as good health – protect against loneliness. People who are able to make ends meet are less lonely than those who find it difficult, and the unemployed are lonelier than the employed.<sup>37</sup> If increasing social and economic inequality is at the root of making it predominantly a lonely world, as economist Noreena Hertz argues, we need a better understanding of the socioeconomic determinants of loneliness, their implications and costs. What are the causal mechanisms by which chronic socioeconomic disadvantage in childhood and adulthood impacts the quantity and quality of social relationships? Do we know enough about the socioeconomic pathways linking loneliness to health, such as education, work decisions, unemployment or income, as well as the cultural heterogeneity-diversity in these relationships? In short, to find solutions to loneliness and social isolation, we have to explore their causes.

### Liberal answer

Loneliness may be just an individual's private issue due to the magnitude and intensity of its impact, however, it affects not only the lonely person but all citizens. It qualifies as a societal problem, and as such, it requires an urgent and adequate liberal response. This is important since loneliness and social isolation have not

<sup>36</sup> Cuccu, L., Stepanova, E. (2021), p.4.

<sup>37</sup> *Loneliness in the EU*. Europeans who are able to make ends meet are less lonely (5%) than those who find it difficult or very difficult (32% and 22%, respectively); those unemployed experience higher loneliness levels compared to the employed.

only physical, mental, economic and societal effects but also political implications, which may, in the long term, pose a serious threat to the quality of our democracies. Loneliness, as Hannah Arendt writes in her famous work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is a common ground for terror, with isolated and lonely people being the basis of totalitarianism.<sup>38</sup> A recent review of literature about the effect of loneliness (and related concepts: social embeddedness, subjective well-being and depression) on civic and political behaviours has highlighted the negative effect on social trust and prosocial behaviours and a strong negative effect on voting turnout. The subjective well-being, and especially its decline over time and inequality within communities, are important indicators of protest voting.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, it has been argued that socially isolated and lonely people are much more likely to vote for radical, often undemocratic political options.<sup>40</sup> This should concern liberals, as it threatens the liberal set of values.

Some measures to prevent and tackle loneliness and social isolation are already being taken around the world. The United Kingdom stands out, being the first to raise the issue to the level of a ministry in 2018, followed by Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>41</sup> In the EU, the European Commission has started building scientific knowledge as a base for policy-making.<sup>42</sup>

38 Arendt, H. (2003). *Izvori totalitarizma*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.

39 Cuccu, L., Stepanova, E. (2021).

40 Renew Democracy Initiative. (2020, December 17). Is Loneliness a Threat to America? *Renew Democracy Initiative*. <https://rdi.org/is-loneliness-a-threat-to-america/>

41 Birnstengel, G. (2020, January 17). What Has the U.K.'s Minister of Loneliness Done to Date? *Nextavenue*. <https://www.nextavenue.org/uk-minister-of-loneliness/>; Warren, K. (2021, February 22). Japan has appointed a 'Minister of Loneliness' after seeing suicide rates in the country increase for the first time in 11 years. *Insider*. <https://www.insider.com/japan-minister-of-loneliness-suicides-rise-pandemic-2021-2>

42 In the context of a European Parliament pilot project (2021–2023) on monitoring loneliness in Europe, the European Commission Directorate-General for

Across European countries, there are numerous initiatives at the local or regional levels aimed to ease the pain of the lonely by fostering connections among people or other kinds of support. A few governments, the Danish, for example, have launched national programmes to raise awareness about the issue or, like the Finnish, included the issue in their programme. However, a public debate on loneliness policies at the national level is generally missing or has entered the public arena to some degree, like in Germany and Sweden.<sup>43</sup> Liberals could raise this discussion at all levels, in cities, regions, and states, as well as on the European and global stages. Considering current strategies, guidelines and priorities in the fight against loneliness and social isolation,<sup>44</sup> liberals could contribute to the increase of public sensitivity and understanding of key issues of loneliness and belonging, social isolation, connectedness and social inclusion. In particular, they could raise awareness of the problems of loneliness and social isolation as important health, social, economic and political issues; enhance health and social services and aid; support innovative

Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL), in collaboration with the Joint Research Centre (JRC), will carry out a number of tasks, including the collection of pan-European data on loneliness, a review of existing literature and identification of knowledge gaps, as well as the establishment of a web platform to monitor loneliness over time and across Europe.

43 Baarck, J., et al. (2021), pp. 35–52.

44 E.g. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. (2018). *A connected society A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/936725/6.4882\\_DCMS\\_Loneliness\\_Strategy\\_web\\_Update\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936725/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update_V2.pdf). Global Initiative for Loneliness and Connection (2022) *Position Statements on Addressing Social Isolation, Loneliness, and the Power of Human Connection*. Government of the United Kingdom. [https://www.gilc.global/\\_files/ugd/410bdf\\_74fffc2d18984b0e8217288b1b12d199.pdf](https://www.gilc.global/_files/ugd/410bdf_74fffc2d18984b0e8217288b1b12d199.pdf). Refer also to Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness (<https://www.gilc.global/>) and their Priorities. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c-b224c5aadd34703fcd10b6/t/5f10a77e7ba69a2da6cec96a/1594926978870/CESIL+Info+Packet.pdf>



solutions that foster connection, a sense of community and social integration. It is important to advocate for embedding the issues of loneliness and social isolation in all sectors of public policy and planning; and to include various actors from the public sector, business, community, as well as voluntary groups in the effort to find a comprehensive response. Last but not least, it is also important that liberals fight stigmatisation, especially among young people, by recognising loneliness as a human condition rather than a mere pathology.

### Great challenge of our time

Loneliness is one of the great challenges of our time. It tells about the emotional ache of the lonely, as well as the social capital of our societies: our values and connectedness, our sense of trust and belonging. Research confirms that loneliness has deleterious health effects, which cost us millions of euros in health expenditure; it threatens economic systems through decreased productivity, higher absenteeism and lower social trust; and it might be fuelling a more distrustful, divisive and aggressive society. Thus, loneliness is also a cry for help, for concerted action at all levels of society, business, government and all of us as individuals to address and resolve the issue. Otherwise, the price might become too high.

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The Loneliness of Followers.  
Artificial People in Synthetic Media

Ada Florentyna Pawlak

In the contemporary world, loneliness has become a cultural metaphor. We observe the determining role of the media in culture creation, talk about hyper-anxiety media, the times of terrified communities and frenzied catastrophism. Functioning in mediatised reality, in which agenda-setting is dominated by information about disasters, cataclysms or tragedies, lowers the sense of security and escalates anxious behaviour. Contemporary technology users are immersed in the culture of social media's editable image - they are alienated, feel the unreality of the world and its disorder, and hopelessly look for identity and companionship. Presenting oneself, being visible, noticeable and heard became more important than the very content one wants to communicate. Without an audience, the narcissistic individual is unable to exist because it is attention that provides the social importance and approval that the narcissistic individual desires so strongly. Narcissism is a form of anti-social individualism, aversion to establishing deeper connections, and a form of self-affirmation and self-satisfaction. The desire for attention seems to be vital to maintain well-being, and utilitarian, instrumental relationships with others make one treat people as objects and objects as people.

In the 1960s, the ELIZA programme created by MIT's Joseph Weizenbaum gained worldwide fame for its use in the treatment

of patients with mental disorders.<sup>1</sup> The chatbot's success lay in the fact that patients consciously preferred to be deceived by a machine rather than assessed by a human. The mechanism of personification – the attribution of human traits and the elicitation of emotional responses during interaction with the programme – was commonly revealed when interacting with ELIZA. When interactive toys, i.e. care-requiring Tamagotchi, Furbies and robotic dolls, entered the US market in the 1990s, Sherry Turkle pointed out that our way of perceiving and defining 'animation' was changing.<sup>2</sup> The matter of biological life is no longer relevant to their young users. Children have opened up to ideas of biology as mechanics and mechanics as alternative biology by establishing close relationships with nurtured simulacra reciprocating their attachment. The need for care and nurturing that came with affective toys was a killer application preparing the ground for the era of bionic sensibility, while the creation of an opportunity to mourn artificial life was the crossing of an important threshold. The children, like ELIZA's testers, treated the affective toys as projection screens. Sherry Turkle called the propensity observed among the test subjects to be involved in creating an animating effect 'ELIZA effect'. The willingness to engage with the inanimate was detected as a feature of the human mind that wants to fill in the gaps. Toys, giving the impression of being endowed with a mind, evoked feelings of care, attachment, gave the promise of constancy and immutability of relationships, and invited empathy which was, however, pure projection. The ELIZA effect describes an interesting phenomenon – it is relatively easy to convince people that a machine really

1 Weizenbaum, J. (1966). ELIZA – A Computer Program for the Study of Natural Language Communications Between Man and Machine. *Communications of the ACM*, 9 (1).

2 In the 1920s, Jean Piaget's research showed that for children, an object appears alive when it is capable of movement without interference from external forces.

thinks and gives meaningful answers, even if these answers are simply randomised from a pre-designed set. The simulation culture that is forming in virtual space is not only changing the style of conversation, but is remodelling our understanding of mind, body, and machine, leading to a new definition of life as communication and interaction. Recognising the various points of contact between psychoanalysis and cognitive science, Sherry Turkle pointed out as early as the 1990s that autosuggestion is an important component of emotional well-being and that simulation culture has transformed the sensation of animation emanating from anthropomorphic images that appear 'vivid enough' to evoke a sense of engagement and concern.<sup>3</sup>

### The Era of the Artificial Influencer

With the introduction of voice assistants such as Amazon's Echo in the last decade, attitudes towards intelligent software have changed dramatically, opening the door to treating non-human entities as interaction partners (Eugene Bot, Samantha Bot).<sup>4</sup> The market success of robotic toys such as Nexi, Cuddler, and Huggler has encouraged manufacturers to research, develop and commercialise an expanding product line. Today, we increasingly interact with agents of unclear ontological status. Among these, we can distinguish the following:

3 Turkle, S. (1996). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

4 An advanced version of ELIZA is A.L.I.C.E. (Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity) created by Richard Wallace. It is an advanced decision support system capable of navigating semantically complex environments. Among the bot projects under development are the Maxbot programme, Eugene Goostman, who passed the Turing test in 2014, or Samantha West, a chatbot telemarketer simulating a human who reacted negatively to accusations of being a bot by realistically conveying a state of indignation.

- Avatars inhabited by humans – for example virtual YouTubers (VTubers), otherwise known as virtual streamers. Although most of them present fans with artificial, digital corporeality designed to be aesthetically appealing, their personalities and interactions with fans are real.
- Avatars controlled by artificial intelligence (AI) – human-simulating virtual robots, i.e. digitally embodied conversational machines (chatbots), i.e. products from *Soul Machines*<sup>5</sup> or *UneeQ*<sup>6</sup>, having a dialogue system (chatbot engine) combined with an interactive 3D model.
- Static avatars – computer-generated images (CGI) of hyper-realistic digital embodiments of non-existent people. These subjectless images, interchangeably referred to as MetaHumans, Virtual Beings, Digital Humans, Artificial Humans or CGI (Computer Generated Influencer), are gaining popularity by mimicking human interactions on social media. These anthropomorphic images exhibit human-like behaviours such as speech, gestures and movements. They can also simulate other human characteristics such as emotion, empathy, reasoning, planning, motivation, as well as memory development and use.
- Digitally embodied agents, although they are merely an image perceived through a screen, are changing the way we interact with technology. The anthropological approach focuses on the following questions: for what purpose and how they exist, how they interact and how they draw on the affordances offered by social media. They shape the worldview of the Alpha generation – the youngest and struggling with loneliness, growing up in a computer-generated synthetic media landscape.

5 Virtual, hyper-realistic, interactive images simulating a human being offered by the *Soulmachines* company, <https://www.soulmachines.com>.

6 Virtual, hyper-realistic, interactive images simulating a human being offered by the *Uneeq* company, <https://digitalhumans.com>.



Thanks to advanced computer graphics and image processing techniques, 3D scanners and artificial intelligence, anthropomorphic human-simulating images produced by teams of specialists - programmers, artists, copywriters and marketing specialists - are increasingly being presented in digital spaces. A virtual human is a configuration of image and sound, described by a programme, displayed in a defined medium - a simulation of a human created through the use of digital technology in visual and auditory dimensions, generated through the use of a specially designed programme or group of programmes. Digitally generated characters in the social media ecosystem are sometimes indistinguishable from people - they spread ideas and values by speaking out on current social issues, and influence lifestyles by giving interviews and appearing on the covers of magazines or in advertising campaigns. The task of their creators is to develop a persona - a personality with a life story, specific views, and a style of social media networking, which, presented attractively and enjoyably, will be an opinion-former for the young audience active on the platforms. For virtual beings, the primary space in which their stories are developed and identities are built is social media, i.e. Instagram, TikTok<sup>7</sup>, YouTube, Twitter or Facebook, which is, however, used more readily by Millennials than Generation Z or Generation Alpha. Most fans of virtual idols are Generation Z. According to data collected by consultancy iiMedia, more than 70% of these followers are aged between 18 and 23.<sup>8</sup>

Virtually embodied, socially interactive agents use multi-modal communication behaviour to attract human attention and engage in simulated interactions. Artificial humans are widely

7 Examples of artificial people's accounts on the popular TikTok portal: <https://www.tiktok.com/@abawils>, <https://www.tiktok.com/@aerbt>, <https://www.tiktok.com/@aimonk.thailand>, <https://www.tiktok.com/@allangregorio>, [https://www.tiktok.com/@amara\\_gram](https://www.tiktok.com/@amara_gram)

8 iiMedia Report. 2021 *China Virtual Idol Industry Development and Research Report*. <https://www.iimedia.cn/c400/79469.html>

used in design, human body motor research, battlefield simulations, and entertainment. A special sub-type is virtual actors, i.e. digital doubles of people (virtual clones) living (now or in the past) in the real world. The digital character is designed by its creators for a specific purpose, like any programme or machine it is supposed to perform a specific task - most often the role of a virtual influencer.<sup>9</sup> An influencer is a person who, through the use of mass media, mainly the Internet, communicates with the social world, becoming a point of reference for those receiving the broadcast message.<sup>10</sup> An influencer is recognisable, has a group of fans, people who follow their activity, the so-called followers. Their message has a strong social impact regardless of whether they are perceived as a model of beauty, success and modernity, fitness and physical strength, humour, creativity and creative energy. The message usually takes the form of 'real-life stories' in the form of photos and videos accompanied by commentary that ties the whole into a coherent narrative. The content that the influencer publishes is designed to attract the audience's attention - its main feature is the attractiveness that characterises both exceptional and controversial messages and those that are styled to be natural, sincere and spontaneous. The recipients of messages, the followers, may be guided by the influencer's opinion when choosing a particular product or service. For recommending a product, the influencer receives

9 Aran-Ramspott, S., Fedele, M., Tarragó, A. (2018). Youtubers' social functions and their influence on pre-adolescence. *Media Education Research Journal*, 26 (57), 71-79.

10 Kádeková and Holienčinová define an influencer as a person who has a significant number of followers on social networks and who is paid by brands to promote products to these followers. Influencer marketing is seen as one of the fastest growing tools for acquiring new customers online. Kádeková, Z., Holienčinová, M. (2018) Influencer marketing as a modern phenomenon creating a new frontier of virtual opportunities. *Communication Today*, 9 (2), 90-104.

compensation from the manufacturer or distributor of the product in the form of money, goods or services.

In the campaigns of global brands such as Prada, Samsung, Porsche, Unilever, Calvin Klein, Ikea and KFC, there is already a significant number of virtual, humanoid influencers challenging the boundaries between reality and virtual reality, the human and the non-human.<sup>11</sup> The illusion is supported by a first-person narrative of 'life' supporting the impression that the virtual entity is actually endowed with a consciousness, a personality, which allows fans to become deeply immersed, to connect with the character and to become involved. Influencers turn people's interests into their own form of cultural currency while promoting themselves and things loved by the general public, transforming narratives of non-human quasi-experiences into capital by combining them with sponsored content, posts about social justice, announcements of major events that people mark on their calendars, creating digital holidays to support the promoted brand's agenda. The creators of virtual beings, acting as influencers, help the audience to believe in the fiction by remaining unknown or only revealing themselves on specialised industry portals, i.e. *Reblium*,<sup>12</sup> *Virtual Humans*<sup>13</sup> or *Reallusion*.<sup>14</sup>

11 Ge, M. *China's virtual idols are reshaping the ways brands reach Gen Z consumers*. <https://kr-asia.com/chinas-virtual-idols-are-reshaping-the-ways-brands-reach-gen-z-consumers>

12 *Reblium*, a company producing hyper-realistic avatars. <https://www.reblium.com>

13 Portal *Virtual Humans* presents profiles of artificial people and their creators <https://www.virtualhumans.org>

14 *Reallusion*, a company producing hyper-realistic avatars. <https://www.reallusion.com>

Companion Creatures.  
Exemplifications of Digital Humans

Already in 2019, artificial CGI agents were almost three times more engaged in social media than humans,<sup>15</sup> and posts by Lil Miquela, the world's most popular US virtual influencer, had 224% more reach than posts by human influencers with the same number of followers in 2018. Lil Miquela has more than 7 million followers across various social networks (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube). Her posts, sponsored by advertisers, include details about her interests, relationships and life in general – elements of storytelling that have attracted her audience to her account in the first place. She constantly mixes the content expected from personal posts with the content expected from promotional posts, resulting in content that serves as advertising without appearing so blatant. She encourages her followers not only to expand what they perceive as part of their reality but to join her in this ambiguous realm.

Amara is a Mongolian virtual model with 84,500 followers on Instagram.<sup>16</sup> She is positioned as warm-hearted, sensible, sensitive and able to express her opinion. She loves animals (during the pandemic, she encouraged people to support the local animal shelter in Ulaanbaatar), is against the production of fur, loves sports (photos of her snowboarding, skateboarding, and kayaking have been posted), enjoys eating pizza and watching movies. The name of the digital entity created in Ulaanbaatar comes from Sanskrit and means 'immortal', 'eternal'. Like a modern-day Pygmalion, her creator states that he designed the character's look by taking inspiration from his favourite celebrities and models – combining elements of their faces to create the ideal woman.

15 HypeAuditor, *The top Instagram virtual influencers in 2019*. <https://hypeauditor.com/blog/the-top-instagram-virtual-influencers-in-2019/>

16 Amara's Instagram account: [https://www.instagram.com/amara\\_gram/](https://www.instagram.com/amara_gram/)

In the initial phase, Amara appeared as a neatly modelled 3D head glued to the digital body of a human model. Combining the digital and physical body helped to avoid the effect of artificiality, despite the computer-modified, inhumanly slimmed waist of the human model. In January 2022, Amara's first TV commercial appeared on Instagram, in which her computer-modelled body was shown in motion. The designers' aim is to embody the character in hologram form and endow her with a recognisable, unique voice so that she can record songs and appear in music videos. The first-person narration depicts her as a real estate agent who is 22 years old, 180 cm tall and weighs 60 kg.<sup>17</sup> Not only are her weight, height and ethnicity known, but attention is focused on various markers of corporeality: her skin is shown with visible pores, which in the case of human models are usually covered with a filter, her nipples stand out under her shirt, tears appear. We see her eating grapes, drinking wine or tea with friends, going to the hairdresser, and playing basketball.

Liu Yexi is a virtual character created by Chuangyi Technology and Culture Co, a Shenzhen-based company that creates digital beings using motion capture technology. In her first video, published in November 2021, she wore the robes of a Taoist priest and sat in a neon-lit alley straight out of a cyberpunk movie. She currently has more than 830 million followers.

In the Alpha Generation's main medium, Tiktok, the phrase: 'I'm already in the future', was posted above a collection of videos building a narrative showing Aliona Pole's daily activities. The influencer reveals that her name is a combination of the Russian name 'Alena' and the word 'Alien', which can be interpreted as showing that she is a hybrid of human and extraterrestrial traits

17 Amara's creators are photographer Bel Belguuntei, digital character stylist Onja Oyjungal and 3D artist Rene Vidra responsible for making changes to improve the virtual model. See: video interview with Amara's creators, 2020, September 23, MNB World. [https://www.facebook.com/mnbworld/videos/1244200935947801/?is\\_lookaside=1](https://www.facebook.com/mnbworld/videos/1244200935947801/?is_lookaside=1)

foreign to humans. However, the illusion of reality is emphasised by her informal attire and the interiors of a typical flat, office or street that actually exist - the influencer has been uploaded into a previously created video recording. In an industry website for CGI creators, we read: 'Aliona Pole is a virtual persona that exists only in the digital realm. She has no real-life prototype - she was invented by a mysterious artist and brought to life through neural networks and computer graphics. Aliona is a model and virtual fashion designer. She advocates rational consumption and is convinced that fashion should not harm the environment - so she experiments with digital materials. She will always be 18, and she will never grow old. Aliona lives in Moscow, Kyoto, on Asteroid B-12, and everywhere in between, including the device you are reading this on.'<sup>18</sup> From the improvised interview, we also learn that she has a dog, exercises, rides an armchair, fools around and that, in addition to her interest in fashion and rational consumption, Aliona's third passion is digital hygiene, i.e. a rational approach to the use of information available online, verifying the data obtained, thinking critically, limiting the flood of information, but also temporary abstinence from digital devices.

Virtual influencers comment on a range of social phenomena and advocate for various causes: Ruby Green demonstrates her participation in climate protests by encouraging people to join; Lil Miquela is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, subtly reminding her followers of the need to support the queer community; they support or question political decisions, using humour and a range of techniques appealing to the younger generation. They not only promote a certain lifestyle but draw attention to specific social topics - often difficult ones, i.e. abortion, violence, death, accidents, illness and addiction. In one post, Miquela

<sup>18</sup> Presentation of the artificial influencer Aliona Pole. <https://www.virtualhumans.org/human/aliona-pole>

defends the Black Lives Matter campaign and calls for the fight against racism and homophobia, receiving widespread support from people watching her account. They are the modern idols, the tribunes - populists constantly communicating with the social world, with committed audiences, supporters, owing their dominance in the media ecosystem to image experts through which they can manipulate the masses. The presented attitudes and information about the ideas supported complement the non-human image, adding reality, creating a figure dedicated to higher causes, a digital hero more human than most people.

More Human than Humans -  
a Remedy for Generational Loneliness

The world has never been as polarised as it is now. While it has never been easier to connect with another human being, we feel lonelier than ever before. In *The Lonely Century*, British economist Noreena Hertz points out that we are facing a global crisis of loneliness - paradoxically, in a social media culture, both singles and those in relationships feel disconnected from their communities and alienated.<sup>19</sup> In Japan, a new line of business has been developing for several years now - friend rental. Busy people who do not have time to nurture interpersonal relationships occasionally pay someone to keep them company while they shop or dine out. We combat loneliness in various, often peculiar ways. One of these is to observe and enter into a para-relationship with an artificial human being.

From the moment the first post is left on the platform, virtual beings appear to have a particular character and a personal worldview. Hairstyle, voice, interests, values and personality traits often remain the same, and the only area subject to

<sup>19</sup> Hertz, N. (2021). *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart*. New York: Crown.

modification is the suggested emotional state of the digital entity, which emphasises the credibility of the story and allows it to establish and maintain a close connection with the audience. Some accounts present everyday life, others artistic, sporting or musical activities, controversial hobbies or ideas and world-views calling to join in and change the world. The reality of the younger generation is filled with people who do not exist, yet appear deeply authentic.

Mediated experience, which is typical of contemporary audio-visual culture, adds a new dimension to sensory cognition of the world, imposing on the viewer a way of perceiving, understanding and interpreting it. These processes are not new. Giovanni Sartori analysed 'tele-vision' and claimed that it changes the nature of humans, who dethrone the word in favour of the image. Video culture transforms the being called *homo sapiens* - a product of written culture - into *homo videns*, a being that dethrones the word in favour of the image.<sup>20</sup> In order to understand words, one must not only know concepts but also possess the ability of abstract thinking. The image represents reality differently than the word - it refers to it without the mediation of concepts. Giovanni Sartori, warning against the domination of what is visible over what is comprehensible, prophesies the so-called mindless, incogitant vision. The author points out that perceiving reality only through images impairs abstract thinking and shapes a viewer susceptible to manipulation, enslaved by prominently displayed, repeated images. *Homo videns* believe when they see - what is imagined thanks to the visual means more to them than what is recounted in words, so that they lose the ability and the need to use abstract concepts - they do not have or do not want to have - access to the conceptual sphere, the space of ideas and thought (*mundus intelligibilis*). The substitution of reality for image, presence for representation, fiction-engaging

20 Sartori, G. (2007). *Homo videns. Telewizja i postmyślenie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.



advertising spilling over into social life and the commodification of emotions, make the concepts presented in *The Society of the Spectacles* more relevant today. Growing up in a synthetic media culture, the Alpha generation will be confronted with the significant problem of distinguishing truth from falsehood and reality from illusion.

It should be noted that the public discourse on artificial intelligence is of moderate cognitive value - it is an amalgamation of information derived from futurological journalism and pop-cultural visual narratives. When asked about the designata of artificial intelligence (AI), most respondents point to perceptually identified artefacts such as voice assistants, holograms or humanoid robots familiar to them from science fiction narratives.<sup>21</sup> Two distinct ways of defining AI seem to dominate the discourse: the ontic one - a distinct entity endowed with self-awareness and cognitive abilities; and the praxeological one - a technology that supports human cognitive activity. The protagonists of narrative fiction are mainly entities that fall into the first category - representatives of 'strong AI' (Artificial general intelligence), systems with cognitive functions equal to or far exceeding those of the human mind.<sup>22</sup> Examples representing 'strong AI' rarely appear in narratives as non-human-like. The predominant narratives are those in which artificial intelligence resembles humans extremely closely or is characterised by super-corporeality, i.e. superhuman strength and resistance to pain or hypersexuality.

What people mean when they talk about AI, therefore, depends on a person's level of expertise. The survey conducted in Poland shows that for the majority of internet users surveyed (53%),

21 Davies, J. (2020) *The art in the artificial*, London: Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and Nesta. <https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/the-art-in-the-artificial>

22 Keegan, R. (2020) A.I. Robot Cast in Lead Role of \$70M Sci-Fi Film. *The Hollywood Reporter*. [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ai-robot-cast-lead-role-70m-sci-fi-film-1300068](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ai-robot-cast-lead-role-70m-sci-fi-film-1300068)

AI is a technology that works without human involvement.<sup>23</sup> When asked in the survey to spontaneously give examples of AI, Polish respondents most often mentioned a humanoid robot.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, artificially generated human images can produce certain behavioural dispositions in humans, to stimulate activity.

For many followers, like early chatbot users, it matters little that virtual influencers are not human. The ELIZA effect works because the consciousness of the virtual being is treated as fluid – at moments of importance, users assume its existence, at others, such as when they do not want to feel judged, they assume its non-existence. Delving into the story on the screen, they suspend disbelief, experimenting with ‘becoming’, accompanying in becoming human, in a staged ritual of transition from the non-human to the human state, becoming mirrors of our interactions in cyberspace. It should be noted that a chatbot need not be embodied. So far, the creators of artificial embodiments have fallen into what is known as the ‘uncanny valley’ – the point in the continuum of realism where we begin to feel scared by the artificial. Leaving the uncanny valley required specialists not only to create a photorealistic face, but also to properly synchronise facial expressions with the character’s body. Today, graphics are photorealistic (e.g. *Matrix Awakens Unreal Engine 5* demo)<sup>25</sup> and hyper-realistic avatars rendered in real-time need

23 NASK (2019). *Sztuczna inteligencja w społeczeństwie i gospodarce. Analiza wyników ogólnopolskiego badania opinii polskich internautów*. [https://akademia.nask.pl/badania/RAPORT\\_AI\\_ONLINE.pdf](https://akademia.nask.pl/badania/RAPORT_AI_ONLINE.pdf)

24 ‘Sztuczna inteligencja w życiu Polaków’ (2019, March 23). *StrefaBiznesu*. <https://polskatimes.pl/jeden-na-dziesieciu-polakow-deklaruje-ze-stara-sie-aktywnie-dokształcac-w-temacie-sztucznej-inteligencji/ar/c3-13988431>

25 The ‘This Person Does Not Exist’ website is a face generator where, thanks to artificial intelligence, a realistic face imitating a real one can be generated in seconds. The AI face generator is powered by StyleGAN, a neural network from NVIDIA developed in 2018. GAN consists of two competing neural networks, one generates something, and the second tries to find whether

no longer lead to negative experiences.<sup>26</sup> Generated faces can be combined with synthetic voices, and 'digital puppet masters' controlling a synthetic character can convincingly tell stories by simulating humans.

### Ever-Present Artificial Companion

It should be noted that the corporeality of virtual influencers is constructed so that Generation Z and Generation Alpha identify with them. They are frustrated by the struggle for status in the digital hierarchy, and the artificial humans reveal the architecture of the media in which they are immersed. In the case of computer-generated bodies, designers add many elements commonly defined as flaws - fine wrinkles, visible skin pores and so on - demonstrating a desire to improve viewers' self-esteem by expanding the category of beauty on social media and normalising imperfections. The imperfect body image acquires credibility and is treated as real and familiar. However, these techniques make artificial characters appear more human than humans. Virtual influencers cover their private lives and comment on public affairs, laugh and cry, are full of energy or tired, brush their teeth and eat ice cream. Through the staging of corporeality, followers

results are real or generated by the first. Training ends when the first neural network begins to constantly deceive the second. It is almost impossible to recognise an image of a fake person. AI is so developed that 90% of fakes are not recognized by an ordinary person and 50% are not recognized by an experienced photographer. <https://this-person-does-not-exist.com/> NVIDIA's StyleGAN face-generating AI software, which is available to everyone as open source, works similarly. Jevin West and Carl Bergstrom have created a website called 'Which Face Is Real', which focuses on teaching people to be more analytical about potentially false portraits. <https://www.whichfacesreal.com>.

26 Seymour, M., Yuan, L. (I.), Dennis, A.R., Riemer, K. (2021). Have We Crossed the Uncanny Valley? Understanding Affinity, Trustworthiness, and Preference for Realistic Digital Humans in Immersive Environments. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 22 (3), 591-617.

of artificial people not only personify but deify artificial people – they greet them in comments, relive their participation in the cult group and expect a response – to be noticed as a loyal follower of the influencer. In a staged interview for Samsung, Lil Miquela lectures: ‘It’s important for you to know that posts on Instagram never tell our whole story – you don’t see the moments of work, you don’t see all the moments that just don’t fit into the posted photo.’ Such a narrative also dehumanises, eliminating the issue of loneliness – a false image of real life and normalising fiction are sold. Synthetic media offers a completely alternative reality thanks to the presence of the seductive imitation-illusion factor. It seems important to me that markers of corporeality – skin pores, sweat, tears, as well as objects – saliva, clipped hair, fingernails – are very common in representations of artificial people. One of the most discussed topics in Lil’s Instagram posts is the body and its problematic image, which resonates strongly with the dilemmas of the young Z and Alpha generations struggling to exist in a media ecosystem subject to the pressures of perfect corporeality. Miquela is not the only virtual influencer to express uncertainty about her appearance.<sup>27</sup> Pippa Pei’s or Meme’s stories are also characterised by a stylisation of self-awareness struggling with its own nature and condition of existence. The official description of the character, presenting her on social media, reads: ‘Meme is an imperfectly beautiful virtual human with real thoughts, who reflects the increasingly diverse view of beauty in our society. Although she has a bit of a complex about her freckled face and the red patches of skin on her forehead and chin, she also takes a positive view, considering them to be attributes which make her unique.’<sup>28</sup> Let us also note that people try to ‘keep face’ and

27 Compare with the narrative of Swedish virtual influencer Esther Oloffson <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXL2ZQiDJyV> or Turkish virtual influencer Lili [https://www.instagram.com/p/CP\\_FdsrvJN](https://www.instagram.com/p/CP_FdsrvJN). Retrieved March 17, 2022.

28 Profile presentation of artificial influencer Meme Konichiwa: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/human/meme-konichiwa>.

engage in impression management, constantly switching between embodying their private and public identities.

Consistency of character is a necessity to keep the audience engaged in the performance, build intimacy between the audience and the performers. It is not difficult to see that virtual beings only function in a disembodied digital public sphere and constantly remain in character, so that they will never disrupt the identity presented to fans, which is usually felt as an unpleasant cognitive dissonance. Although the social media accounts of virtual beings vary widely in terms of style, aesthetics, purpose and messages, they share a remarkable consistency - posts, even if they cover different topics, always remain in a similar visual format. Some take the form of a storyboard, in which each post and caption tells a story about problems in relations with friends, relationships and other sources of conflict and drama. Consistency is linked to trust, reliability and transparency, honesty, integrity and credibility. It refers to the influencer's relationship with their followers, the narrative coherence of the influencer and the link between them and advertisers. Because virtual beings are not human, they are perceived as less critical, and therefore users can trust them more easily. Consumers, knowing that they are interacting with bots, do not seem to care about their lack of physical corporeality and do not formulate expectations in this area of the relationship, being satisfied with the communication aspect. The exploitation of the need for a close relationship is palpable in the narratives of Miquela, whose profile reads: 'I've never thought of myself as an influencer. I think if people are influenced by me, it's because they can tell I'm reflecting with them.' A virtual person's story constantly walks the line between fantasy and reality, allowing them to maintain curiosity and loyalty, an engaged audience that can turn into both an engaged customer base for brands and followers of a particular idea.

In the narrative paths of the characters, questions such as 'what does it mean to be a digital person' are very common. This theme is usually continued by followers in the convention of

so-called drama, full of intense feelings or in the form of care-free comments provoking questions about what and who is 'real'. From the perspective of the problem of loneliness, which I also link to the disappearance of the rituals that integrated the community, it seems interesting to me that the virtual influencer 'discovers' with amazement that they are not a real person by engaging the community in discussions about their ontological status. The more human the virtual influencer becomes, the more the audience wants to establish a personal relationship, get close and get to know their feelings. Digital Humans answers Internet users' questions about being 'real' by turning them around: is the person asking the question even real? What does 'real' actually mean? Is anyone online 'real'? Is the online version of anyone really an 'accurate' representation? Virtual influencers question the arbitrary boundaries drawn between what is 'real' and 'unreal' and suggest that verifiable classifications of who is fake and who is real have never existed. The division between the real world and simulation is blurred. Signs and symbols become simulacra, meaning that they no longer serve to describe reality but, functioning separately, begin to dominate it. They cease to have a point of reference in it. The world becomes incomprehensible, asking the perceiving mind a question to which it is unable to provide an answer: how can concepts such as 'objectivity', 'truth' or 'causality' have meaning in an anthroposphere constructed in this way?<sup>29</sup>

### Artificial People in a Solitary World

The world of virtual influencers is a lucrative spectacle that imitates reality. At the same time, it makes the distinction between reality and simulation blurred. Digital people are incorporated

29 Baudrillard, J. (2008). *Zbrodnia doskonała*. Warszawa: Sic!

into the narratives in which physical people live, presenting a utopian society free of disease, old age and all the discomfort that characterises the human condition. Spectacle, in digital culture, has replaced reality, and the division between reality and simulation has become blurred. Signs and symbols do not refer back to reality - they are detached and begin to dominate it. Artificial people in a solitary world are meant to influence their audience - to shape their views and behaviour, their political and consumer choices. They sell products devoid of a material dimension and thus of functional and exchangeable value. In the digital anthroposphere, advertised products, i.e. clothes and cosmetics, become a sign without a designatum in reality, positioning users in a cyber hierarchy.<sup>30</sup> It is also important to note that artificial influencers rarely function alone - it is a system based on collaboration and dependency. Characters interact with each other, create a shared world, a human-non-human universe in which they promote each other or fight wars with each other. They pose with human celebrities 'live' at popular media events, and the fact that they do not actually exist sparks the audience's interest. What exists is mixed in synthetic media with what does not exist. Immateriality refers to the absence of tangible or tactile properties. It should be emphasised that cyberspace is not separate from physical reality - it is something equally real, a place where our causality is realised. The flattening of the ontological hierarchy fulfils a radical transhumanist demand: the absolute equality of entities.

Reality and virtual reality intermingle in experience - the boundaries between the two are fluid and sometimes completely blurred. The illusion of reality rests not in the technology itself but in the users' desire to treat the products of their imagination as if they were real. Artificial humans exist intentionally because the youth want to endow them with existence. While technology can satisfy a range of human needs and users will not feel the

30 DRESSX, a virtual fashion company. <https://www.instagram.com/dressx/>

difference between reality and its artificially generated copies, it is important to remember that realistic simulations evoke real physiological reactions and specific behaviours and can lead to a loss of a sense of reality. We should remember that, as he observed the operation of his invention, Joseph Weizenbaum warned of the danger that humanity would choose the company of a simulation in place of another human being. When confronted with a programme capable of imitating empathy, humans revealed their secrets more readily than before a human being. Synthetic media simulating reality are both 'narcissistic media' for 'escaping from feeling' and replicating egotistical behaviour. They provoke a rethinking of the category of loneliness in terms of reality and unreality, as well as intentionality.

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## The Loneliness of Followers

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## Countering Loneliness by Strengthening Communities

Luca Volpe

According to a survey published in 2020 on *Il Sole 24 Ore* website, an increasing number of people in Italy feel the unbearable weight of loneliness.<sup>1</sup> A condition which, based on the survey, appears to deprive the new generations of energy, as they are strangled by the uncertainty of the future and an unstable present without ideals. The pandemic has aggravated this situation, leading to new consequences - due to the restriction of personal freedom, the consequent isolation, discrimination and increasing distrust of others, as well as uncertainties regarding work, education, family life, economy and many other variables that have appeared on the horizon.

From the aforementioned survey, it emerges that young people suffer the most. Women more than men, and people in the south of the country more than those in the north.

In the survey, we can read that 'among the reasons given to explain the sense of loneliness, there is precisely the difficulty in being able to associate with one's friends, partner or relatives (61%). The new restrictions are, in fact, perceived as a threat to social relations: 53% of those who feel more alone, and 37% of Italians in general are convinced that the restrictions will affect them negatively. A risk, in this case, felt more by men (59%)

1 Noto, A. (2020, November 3). Pandemia: il 55% soffre di solitudine, disagio sempre più forte tra i giovani. *Il Sole 24 Ore*. <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/pandemia-55percento-soffre-solitudine-disagio-sempre-piu-forte-i-giovani-ADPDUoy>

than by women (48%).’ Therefore, personal relationships are the fulcrum of the ‘sense of loneliness’.

At the European level, a generalised increase in levels of loneliness has emerged. In particular, the pandemic has affected the relationship between different generations and loneliness. In the pre-pandemic period, the elderly had shown higher levels of loneliness than other age groups. In 2016, there was a directly proportional relationship between age and loneliness. 9% of young adults (18-25 years) and 10% of 26-45 years old experienced loneliness, while in the 46-64 age group and above 65 years old, it was 12% and 15%, respectively. This situation changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in the first months of the pandemic, young adults were the group that felt loneliness the most, reaching even higher levels than the older group before the pandemic. More specifically, the share of people experiencing loneliness among respondents aged 18-25 increased from 9% to 35% during the first months of the pandemic and thus nearly quadrupled. Among the other generations, loneliness increased less - by 15%, 11% and 8% in the age groups 26-45, 46-64 and 65 years, as well as for those over 80.<sup>2</sup>

The research mentioned above also shows that people experiencing loneliness tend to perceive strangers as hostile and threatening, and they have similar feelings towards their city or neighbourhood. The web also has an impact on these dynamics - its use is directly proportional to the discomfort people feel when using it to stay in touch with other people. Social media has an ambivalent function. On the one hand, it gives the illusion of being less alone, on the other hand, it heightens the sensation of loneliness.

As we said at the beginning, it is impossible not to highlight how, during the pandemic, restrictions, quarantines, curfews, social distancing, as well as suspension of community activities

<sup>2</sup> Eurofound. 2016 EQLS and 2020 LWC surveys.

and events were implemented throughout Europe. While these measures have been necessary to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have also led to unprecedented forms of social isolation, with long-term effects on mental health that are still not evident. Some fear that the toll of loneliness could have consequences long after the virus disappears.

In terms of mortality risk, loneliness has been compared to obesity and smoking.<sup>3</sup> It is associated with physical and psychological health problems. Lonely adults tend to suffer from higher levels of cortisol (the ‘stress hormone’), increased blood pressure, more frequent sleep disturbances and increased cardiovascular resistance compared to non-lonely individuals, both in stressful situations and at rest. Over time, this results in chronic inflammation, as well as higher morbidity and mortality rates. Loneliness is also associated with depressive symptoms and unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and lack of exercise.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, loneliness can alienate affected individuals from others even further. Individuals suffering from loneliness tend to show lower levels of empathy and feel more threatened by unexpected life situations than their non-lonely counterparts. As Noreena Hertz argues, these risks translate into higher levels

3 Holt-Lunstad, J., et al. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 227–237.

4 Adam, E.K. (2006). Transactions among trait and state emotion and adolescent diurnal and momentary cortisol activity in naturalistic settings. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 31, 664–679. Adam, E.K., Gunnar, M.R. (2001). Relationship functioning and home and work demands predict individual differences in diurnal cortisol patterns in women. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 26, 189–208. Adam, E.K., et al. (2006). Day-to-day dynamics of experience-cortisol associations in a population-based sample of older adults. *The Periodicals of the National Academy of Sciences*, 103, 17058–17063. Adam, E.K., et al. (2008). Incorporating hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis measures into preventive interventions for adolescent depression: Are we there yet? *Development and Psychopathology*, 20, 975–1001.

of distrust, intolerance of others and, ultimately, can pose a risk to social cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

### Evolution: From Packs to WhatsApp Groups

It is in the dichotomy of loneliness/personal relationships that we should analyse the phenomenon we are dealing with. Throughout the centuries, renowned thinkers have told us that man is a social animal, as first said by Aristotle. However, the life of a human being is also characterised by many moments of solitude. At first, evolution wanted our ancestors to live in packs, then in tribes, up to the present day when society and institutions recognise the individuality of each person as an entity separate from all others. We are singles living in groups. Work groups, groups of friends, WhatsApp groups, and so on.

It is, therefore, interesting to note how in the Anglo-Saxon language, we differentiate 'solitude' intended as intimacy, a moment of sought-after seclusion, from what is defined as 'loneliness' in its meaning of 'isolation'. The isolation that is certainly not wanted, desired, but almost imposed. This concept is found in psychology - loneliness is described as isolation born, for example, from a lack of empathy or due to disorders affecting the ability to build relationships with others or, again, by sociopathy, etc. This, in many cases, leads to depression with its burden and enormous costs - not only economic.

In literature, loneliness has a subjective nature; it is the perception of a discrepancy between a person's desired network of relationships and the real one. This cognitive discrepancy is experienced as a profoundly negative experience. Loneliness is, therefore, not just about having too few social contacts per se

<sup>5</sup> Hertz, N. (2020). *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart*. London: Sceptre.

but also about the perception that these relationships are not satisfying enough. In other words, loneliness does not mean being alone but feeling alone. In this sense, loneliness is different from social isolation, which has an objective connotation, defined by the absence of relationships with other people and/or a very small number of meaningful connections. Solitude describes the act of being alone voluntarily, which once again implies the objective condition of being away from others but also the possibility of having pleasant and positive feelings about this situation. Sometimes, in fact, people find pleasure in isolating themselves - it is a way of rejecting the ties to a society that has somehow excluded them.

Much attention has been paid to the relationship between loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is not automatically linked to objective social isolation. Socially isolated people are not necessarily lonely and lonely people are not necessarily socially isolated.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, the World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated the cost of direct and indirect mental health at a trillion dollars a year. And loneliness, in its meaning of 'isolation', as we have seen, often leads to problems relating to mental health.<sup>7</sup>

- 6 Andersson, L. (1998). Loneliness research and interventions: A review of the literature. *Aging & Mental Health*, 2 (4), 264–274. Cacioppo, J., Hawkley, L.C., Thisted, R.A. (2010). Perceived social isolation makes me sad: 5-year cross-lagged analyses of loneliness and depressive symptomatology in the Chicago Health, Aging, and Social Relations Study. *Psychological Aging*, 25 (2). De Jong Gierveld, J., van Tilburg, T.G., Dykstra, P.A. (2006). Loneliness and Social Isolation. *Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*. Rokach, A. (2015). Loneliness, alienation, solitude, and our lives. In Sha'ked, A., Rokach, A. (eds.). *Addressing Loneliness: Coping, prevention and clinical interventions*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- 7 WHO (2022). *Mental Health and Substance Use*. <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/promotion-prevention/mental-health-in-the-workplace>

It should not come as a surprise that the UK government thought of a Commission on Loneliness.<sup>8</sup> 'For too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life,' the then Prime Minister Theresa May declared a few years ago. She also added that 'according to a last year's report by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, more than 9 million people in Britain, about 14% of the population, often or always feel lonely. This costs UK employers up to \$3.5 billion annually.' These are the costs.<sup>9</sup>

### Loneliness Equal to Violence

At the social level we could argue that to fight loneliness/exclusion/isolation it would be useful to think in terms of inclusion. It could also be beneficial to understand what the role of law and the task of legislators might be.

As we know, a person's ability to interact with others is also the result of the so-called 'social skills'. Aristotle, it has been said, argued that the human being is a social animal. It is interesting to note that as children, especially at birth, we are unable to provide for our needs or our safety - our survival, therefore, becomes possible only thanks to, for example, interactions with our parents. Like children, adults also have the opportunity to live, to create complex societies and scientific or cultural progress thanks to cooperation between peers and interactions with others. Social skills are so fundamental that they are mostly automatic and out of conscious control. The worlds of psychology, neuroscience and biology have shown us that these important social skills are

8 UK Government (2021, June 17). *Loneliness minister: "It's more important than ever to take action"* (press release). <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/loneliness-minister-its-more-important-than-ever-to-take-action>

9 Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2017). *Combating loneliness one conversation at a time*. [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/jcf/pages/164/attachments/original/1620919309/rb\\_dec17\\_jocox\\_commission\\_finalreport.pdf?1620919309](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/jcf/pages/164/attachments/original/1620919309/rb_dec17_jocox_commission_finalreport.pdf?1620919309)

partly learned through experience and partly determined by the genetic predispositions of each individual.

We will focus on those abilities that come from experience and those which need to be supported – as repressing them causes isolation. If the social interaction is removed, a person is practically ‘isolated’, and this will trigger a mechanism of exclusion that eventually, for the most part, leads to loneliness. This mechanism will also, over time, cause damage to a single person and the entire community.

Some have noticed how ‘in breaking free from the authorities, hierarchies and traditional constraints that oppressed him,’ writes Ferraresi, ‘modern man found himself alone’. He is tearing apart and has torn apart every physical form of mediation: ‘Orders, structures, systems, parties, churches, laws, habits, traditions, dogmas, codes, regimes, opinions, customs, and even biological structures.’<sup>10</sup>

It is no coincidence that Article 3 of the Italian Constitution says that ‘all citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions’ and above all that ‘it is the duty of the Republic to remove economic and social obstacles which, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country.’ The full development of the human person is participation. Directly and/or indirectly preventing people, due to those characteristics (sex, race, language, etc.), from participating in society, being integrated, active and cohesive parts of a community means excluding them, isolating them, and leaving them ‘alone’ in loneliness.

Let us think about women, for example. Charlotte Whitton, Canadian feminist and esteemed mayor of the city of Ottawa said

<sup>10</sup> Ferraresi, M. (2022). *Solitudine*. Turin: Einaudi.



that 'women have to do everything twice as good as men to be judged half as good. Fortunately, it is not difficult.' This observation is well constructed with logic and an approach that would induce laughter but, in essence, it is not funny at all.

It is more than evident that the issue is serious and delicate – it is enough to look at the data on gender-based violence in Europe. It shows that 33% of women from EU countries have suffered physical or sexual violence at least once since the age of 15.<sup>11</sup> There has been an increase in both the quantity and the severity of violence they have suffered during the pandemic, as well as in workplace harassment, which is also happening online. According to the data released by the European Institute for Gender Equality, the total annual costs of gender-based violence against women in the EU amount to 366 billion Euro.<sup>12</sup>

As I have already mentioned, everything has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Women have been crushed by the increase in activity that patriarchal and male chauvinist subculture imposes on them (management of children and home, to name a few) on the one hand and the strict restrictions on the other.

This is how women then often find themselves isolated from institutions and societies that leave them, as we hear in the news, 'alone with their fate'. Such loneliness is also in some way equal to violence. This is, in essence, a trait of loneliness linked to the issues of discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of equal opportunities for all, as explained in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution.

From this point of view, one cannot fail to think of the impoverished as well. The rampant phenomenon of absolute poverty

11 FRA (2015). *Violence Against Women: an EU-wide survey*. [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf)

12 Rossitto, S. (2021, July 7). La violenza di genere costa all'Europa 366 miliardi di euro all'anno. *Il Sole 24 Ore*. <https://allegyoop.ilssole24ore.com/2021/07/07/costi-violenza-di-genere/>

places those who suffer from it outside the social construct. They are in a situation that is no longer about living but about surviving, with all the implications of social rejection in a world full of paid services, and where the stigma towards those who 'cannot' afford something becomes more and more notable. Just to give an example, the data provided by Caritas in their report on poverty in Rome, called *Poverty in Rome: a point of view. A false restart?* are dramatic. It demonstrates how close the relationship is between increasingly rampant absolute poverty, which has tripled in recent years, and loneliness, especially among the elderly.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding this last aspect, it must be said that in the most industrialised societies the number of elderly seems to be increasing. Loneliness spreads among them. The University of Calabria, with the publication of the paper *The elderly and depression: the role of loneliness*,<sup>14</sup> analysed the correlation between the loneliness of the elderly and depression. One of the goals of the study was to understand the relationship between social support, loneliness and depression. Depression appears to be closely related to experiencing loneliness. For an elderly person, it becomes increasingly difficult to cultivate relationships, peers pass away, illnesses might reduce their mobility, and there might be deaths in the family (of a spouse, for example). All these elements can contribute to a sense of loneliness, which increases the risk of developing a depressive disorder. Whereas, in contexts rich in social interaction, the elderly tend to age better, reducing the rates of senile depression.

And then, there are the fragile people. Fragility or human vulnerability is a macro category that includes all, and especially all those, who do not have the strength to adhere to the distortions of the world, the stereotypes of strength, manners and customs.

13 Caritas (2022). *Rapporto povertà 2021 "False ripartenze?"*. <http://www.caritasroma.it/2022/04/false-ripartenze/>

14 Santaera, P., Servidio, R.C., Costabile, A. (2017). Anziani e depressione: il ruolo della solitudine. *Psicogeriatrica*, 12(3), 22-30.

For example, we live in an era where we have not yet understood that a person in a wheelchair cannot go up the stairs without a slope for the wheels. It is a simple concept, yet it has not yet been fully absorbed, and many sidewalks in our cities are not wheelchair-friendly. And this is isolation, this is a germ of loneliness. If we have not understood this simple enough concept, what must be the situation in the field of mental health? Mental health is less 'visible' than other types of disabilities. Yet people with mental health problems are left alone by institutions, which are too often unable to be close to them. This loneliness also touches their relatives and people close to them, who feel guilty for not knowing how to be useful, and who feel squeezed between impotence and social stigma. In short, people with any degree of disability are surrounded by more or less visible barriers that isolate them from the social context. The greatest of these barriers is the cultural one that prevents everyone from understanding how to not isolate and exclude people who, as such, are an added value for the communities in which they live.

### The Role of Law

In light of what we have explained, another thing to consider is the role of law in countering the most negative aspects of loneliness. As it is well known, the law has historically dealt with things (real estate, objects, money, etc.). The possibility of the right to take care of people has long been gaining ground. Finally, in Italy and most of Europe, the fight against loneliness has begun. Think of people who, until recently, were prevented from having a family because of their gender. Now, with the various forms of civil union, it is possible for people of different genders and people of the same gender to establish a family. Some distinctions and discriminatory elements remain, but the process has begun. In Italy, with civil unions, recognition has been given, and we can say that with this law humans can feel less lonely within the social context in which they live.

Another area in which the realisation of the person and their dignity could lead to loneliness is fertility. In Italy, as in many other countries of Europe, those who cannot have children today have some solutions. On the other hand, there are lonely children who have no family, and no family life, which is a human right. Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life'. The law offers various solutions - from foster care to adoption. Then, there are cases of domestic violence, in which the individual feels alone despite having a family. In these cases, the law reacts both in the civil sphere, offering solutions for isolation from that family, and in the criminal sphere, convicting those who have to be condemned.

Then, there is the loneliness of the prisoners. We tend to imagine prison as an ugly place made of bars and concrete in which we lock up malevolent souls. We say we want to re-educate them, but it often seems that, after all, we condemn them forever. When we talk about prison policies, we often think of spaces, toilets and beds - factors that are certainly important but ignore no less relevant aspects, such as the feelings and relationships of people who live in those places. Life in prison is a life of isolation and, therefore, loneliness. Unfortunately, it is no coincidence that there is a very high number of depressive states and, too often, suicides in prisons.

And then there is the loneliness of the sick. One fact is very significant - 'more than half of the adult cancer patients interviewed have experienced loneliness in recent months', according to a study published in *CANCER*, the peer-reviewed journal of the American Cancer Society. Some studies conducted before the pandemic reported that between 32% and 47% of cancer patients felt lonely. In this latest survey, carried out in May 2020, 53% out of 606 patients diagnosed with cancer were classified as suffering from loneliness. Patients in this group reported higher levels of social isolation, as well as more severe symptoms of anxiety, depression, fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive

dysfunction, and pain. They were also less likely to be married or in a relationship, and more likely to live alone and with a lower annual family income. The researchers note that while previous studies carried out before and during the pandemic had found correlations between loneliness and symptoms of anxiety, depression, fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive dysfunction and pain, this is the first study that analysed all of these symptoms in the same group of patients.<sup>15</sup>

There are the patients who have the right to be informed, not to be discriminated against, who have the right to treatment and those who also have the right to renounce those treatments, that is, the right not to suffer. As well as the right to die and to have help, in particular cases, to die with dignity.

### New Challenges and Opportunities

Another, no less relevant, theme linked to loneliness is the relationship with new technologies. Social media, the web and technology have changed and are changing the rules that govern our public and private lives, including the way we live through our experiences of isolation and loneliness.

A research group, Relationships Australia Queensland carried out an analysis which shows that 42% of the population uses at least four communication tools (Facebook, Twitter, blog, e-mail), but at the same time, they complain of feeling lonelier. It can almost be said that the advent of technological communication systems has produced new forms of sociality. A sort of web loneliness would seem to have arisen. There is no certainty about the new dynamics of loneliness on the web, and doubts arise - whether it is the loneliness that pushes people to the increased use of technology or is it the technology that leads people

15 Miaskowski, Ch., et al.(2021). Loneliness and symptom burden in oncology patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Cancer*, 127 (17), 3246-3253. <https://acsjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cncr.33603>

to isolate themselves and experiment with new forms of withdrawal. Probably both possibilities are true: new technologies redefine the loneliness we live in by offering us new opportunities but also new anguish and frustration.

Last but not least, the first reaction to the highlighted problems (although not exhaustive) is coming from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which in the 'Mission 5 - Inclusion and Cohesion', with a total budget of 19.81 billion Euro, aims to support the empowerment of women and attempts to combat gender discrimination, increase employment prospects for young people and reduce regional economic-social imbalances. It also includes plans for urban regeneration and the creation of new public housing structures for the redevelopment of degraded areas.

It is a lot but not enough, and there is no doubt that there is still much to be done to reduce 'the barriers' as indicated by the Article 3 of the Italian Constitution, to try not to leave anyone behind, to try to make everyone feel part of a community that includes and not excludes.

### The Person at the Centre of Political Action

John Terrence Cacioppo argued, 'Imagine a condition that makes a person depressed, irritable and self-centred, and which at the same time is associated with a 26% increase in the risk of premature death. Imagine then that in industrialised countries, about one-third of the population suffers from this condition, one in 12 people suffers from it in a severe form, and these rates are increasing. Income, education, gender and ethnicity are not protective factors. This condition is contagious and does not affect a particular group of vulnerable individuals, but manifests itself in ordinary people and situations. This condition exists - loneliness.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cacioppo, J.T., Cacioppo, S. (2018). The growing problem of loneliness. *Lancet*, 391 (10119), 426.

Economic efforts are important, but it is political and cultural efforts that are needed - education to revolutionise our thinking. Each person carries his or her story, which contributes to the greater story of the community. In short, the community appears like the gears of a watch in which each person represents a tooth or a gear, large or small - without which the watch would not work as it should. This should be the political and cultural vision of the society. And instead, it feels like we live in a society divided into capable and incapable, strong and fragile, a society made up of people and lonely people. And the stronger these differences are, the more people are left alone in their solitude. Because they are different from the narrative and because they are not strong and capable enough.

The solutions then must aim at a cultural revolution which implements the European Convention on Human Rights. It is necessary to put the Person and their freedoms at the centre of political action and balance them with the freedom of others. Breaking down gender differences and barriers for people with different abilities and eliminating the gap between rich and poor - rich and poor economically, rich and poor socially, rich and poor culturally.

One could imagine teaching the basics of psychology in schools from an early age. An education in social emotions, sociability and the relationship with oneself, as well as with others. Much has been done in dental hygiene in recent decades, and it is now time to focus on mental hygiene. And then, as it has been said many times, the barriers that cause loneliness should be demolished. Social exclusion of discriminated people would be avoided. Strengthening the cultural and 'mental' level of the individual would mean strengthening all communities both in terms of human growth and also, as we have seen, in terms of economic growth.

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## Countering Loneliness...

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## Loneliness Among the Youth and Queer People

Julian Kull

In this chapter, we will discuss the loneliness of queer people with a special focus on queer youth in our society. We will talk about their concerns and needs, as well as consider why queer youth are especially vulnerable. We will take a closer look at the problem of self-harm and how loneliness can reinforce such behaviour.

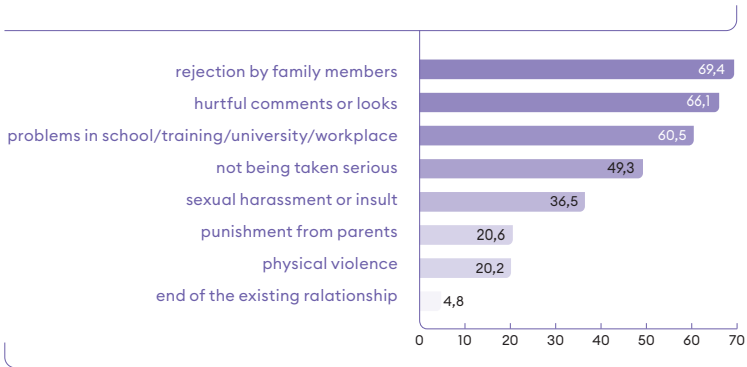
### Fears and Rejection

In society, we are always confronted by intolerance, hate speech, lies and theses which disregard science. The acceptance of lesbians, gays and bisexuals has grown over the last decades, and the way society treats non-hetero-normative forms of living is also an increasingly discussed issue. On the one hand, there is a position of acknowledgement in society – one that accepts diversity and strives for better living conditions for the queer community. On the other hand, there are conservative positions denying the diverse way of living. They follow the heteronormative image of the two sexes. People whose sexual identity or sexual desires are not following these norms are still considered strange and are exposed to the risk of social exclusion. They are still confronted with abhorrent explanations, such as the heightened risk of disease. Extreme right politicians and strict religious dignitaries put LGBTIQ people on the same level as criminals and release anti-queer laws or try to defame queers.

Queer youth that does not conform to society are in a vulnerable position throughout the entire European Union.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth are first and foremost people - like everybody else, they have wishes, goals and usual daily worries. They attend school, think about their future, listen to music and dress accordingly. They belong to various social classes that shape their daily lives, as well as future living conditions.

However, for queer youth recognising their sexual orientation or gender identity is an enormous burden. Many will try to suppress their feelings, fearing uncomfortable situations or reactions from their social environment. Just like in the study of the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) *Coming out - und dann ...? (Coming out - and then ...?)*<sup>1</sup>, where 73.9% out of more than 4,000 young respondents feared their friends' rejection, and 69.4% feared rejection from their family members.



Fears of young people before their first external coming out  
(N=4,034) (multiple answers are possible) Source: DJI Study Coming Out 2015

Another study shows that more than 80% of homosexual and transgender students encounter harassment due to their sexual

<sup>1</sup> Krell, C., Oldermeier, K. (2015). *Coming Out - und dann...? Ein DJI-Forschungsprojekt zur Lebenssituation von lesbischen, schwulen, bisexuellen und trans\* Jugendlichen und jungen Erwachsenen*. München: Deutsches Jugendinstitut e. V.

orientation or gender identity, and 70% even feel threatened at school.<sup>2</sup>

A lot of the youth are subdued, unable to find a contact person to talk about their feelings and/or become lonely. Such fears and the rejection of their environment, to a large extent, explain the higher suicide rates among queer youth.

A study from Moritz Prasse published in 2019 provides the following data about youth suicidality: 'Among 15-20-year-olds, suicide is the second most common cause of death - after fatal accidents - and is thus of high relevance in terms of both health policy and education'.<sup>3</sup> 'The share [of suicides] in all deaths is 29% for male adolescents and young men and 28% for female adolescents and young women'.<sup>4</sup> About one in twelve young people report having attempted suicide in the past.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there are much more frequent parasuicides. According to the WHO, these are acts with an intentional non-fatal outcome in which an individual engages in non-habitual behaviour that, without third-party intervention, would constitute self-harm or intentionally ingests a substance at a dose in excess of that prescribed or generally considered therapeutically considered dose, and which aims to bring about changes through the actual or expected consequences.

There are no accurate figures on committed suicides of LGBTI youth because sexual orientation and gender identity are not mentioned in death certificates. It will continue to be the case, as

- 2 Brill, S., Pepper, R. (2011). *Wenn Kinder anders fühlen – Identität im anderen Geschlecht. Ein Ratgeber für Eltern*. München, Basel: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag.
- 3 Becker, K. (2004). Suizidalität in Kindheit und Jugend – Einführung in den Themenschwerpunkt. *Kindheit und Entwicklung*, 13 (1), 1-4.
- 4 Engeland, H. (2004). Prävention parasuizidalen Verhaltens in der Adoleszenz: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen. *Kindheit und Entwicklung*, 13 (1), 38-46.
- 5 Brunner, R., et al. (2007). Prevalence and psychological correlates of occasional and repetitive deliberate self-harm in adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 161, 641-649.

there are no ways to identify post-mortem whether an adolescent was homosexual, bisexual or transgender.

Furthermore, Prasse writes that a study from the US National Transgender Discrimination Survey showed that 41% of the surveyed people had already committed a suicide attempt.<sup>6</sup> Another study mentioned by Prasse showed that significantly more transgender people have suicidal thoughts and commit suicide attempts than any other reference group.

An evaluation by Päßflin and Junge construes 16 fatal suicides among 2,000 chaperoned youths.<sup>7</sup> If these numbers are correct, this would mean 800 suicides per 100,000 transgender people in comparison to 11.5 suicides per 100,000 people in the total population.<sup>8</sup>

‘Acting on the assumption that 40% of transgender adolescents will experience suicidal crises, there must be consequences for the pedagogical work in which we encounter transgender youth. Because the risk that this young person is under such enormous psychological stress that he/she considers taking his/her own life is high. Such circumstances require a sensitive approach and, above all, the ability to identify early warning signs and act accordingly.’<sup>9</sup>

A survey conducted by a Cologne-based youth centre among 296 LGBTIQ youths during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that

6 Grant, J. M., et al. (2011). *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

7 Päßflin, F., Junge, A. (1992). *Geschlechtsumwandlung, Abhandlung zur Transsexualität*. Stuttgart, New York: Schattauer Verlag.

8 Haas, A. P., Eliason, M., Mays, V. M., Mathy, R. M., Cochran, S. D., D’Augelli, A. R., Clayton, P. J. (2011). Suicide and Suicide Risk in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Populations: Review and Recommendations. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 10–51.

9 Prasse, M. (2019). *Selbstverletzendes Verhalten und suizidale Krisen – Alltägliche Herausforderung in der Arbeit mit trans\* Jugendlichen (nicht nur) in LSBTI-Jugendtreffs*. Köln: Schwules Netzwerk NRW e.V.

more than 30% were strongly affected emotionally. The reactions to this emotional strain were varied. More than two-thirds of the respondents suffered from depressive moods (66.9%), panic attacks (36.1%) and self-inflicted injuries (17.9%). A quarter of the LGBTIQ youth and young adults struggled with suicidal thoughts. Among those under 18 years old, this percentage increases to 38.4%. The propensity towards suicide was correspondingly high among them. 7% of minors have tried to commit suicide.<sup>10</sup>

The lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the forced elimination of social contacts were especially hard for queer youths. A lot of them were unable to gain experiences with their sexual orientation because of the lack of possibilities for dating or festivities; they were unable to meet queer peers. Especially transgender queers suffered due to the closure of queer youth meeting points, where they would have been able to show their gender identity and experience their first steps in their actual gender.

Adolescents were locked in together with their parents, sometimes causing additional tension and stress. Especially those that have one or even two transphobic parents, have been suffering a lot and report high levels of stress.

It should be noted that queer youths have a high demand for contact. The ability to be in contact with similar people and live according to their sexual or gender identity positively affects their development.

### Lonely in 'LGBT-free Zones'

Queer youths who have been experiencing loneliness are suffering significantly more often under pressure and show a tendency towards self-harm or suicidal behaviour.

<sup>10</sup> Anyway-Köln (2022, July 10). *Ein Viertel der LSBTIQ\*-Jugendlichen hat Suizidgedanken wegen Corona*. anyway-koeln.de: <https://www.anyway-koeln.de/ein-viertel-der-lsbtiq-jugendlichen-hat-suizidgedanken-wegen-corona/>

As results show, adolescents whose sexual life or gender are not following heteronormative expectations are experiencing the phase of their inner and outer coming out ambivalently. On the one hand, it is an important step in gaining autonomy and developing identity; on the other hand, it is often combined with insecurities and fear.

I conclude that lawmakers and social institutions have a special responsibility for queer youths. Queer youth clubs and the possibility of contacting similarly-minded people have a positive effect on their mental health and should be expanded.

Recreation and institutions focused on queer youths are not within reach for most people willing to use them. This increases the importance of opening institutions to sexual and gender diversity, as well as sensitizing and educating employees. It is also crucial to increase the offers provided by the institutions so that they can be used regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

For recreational institutions, this means showing their openness and ensuring that visitors are received accordingly. Low-threshold services and contact possibilities, as well as LGBTI counselling for youths combined with common recreational activities, create a frame for the empowerment of visitors.

Discrimination, especially in schools, universities and work, must be fought decisively against and reduced.

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersexual youths share the same environment and want to have the same chances and the same rights to achieve those as any other young people. They want to take on responsibilities while in relationships or start raising a family, they want their schools to be comfortable places for learning and gaining experiences, to plan their spare time without fear of discrimination, and to meet like-minded people. For this to be possible, lawmakers need to abolish unequal laws which are affecting sexual orientation or gender identity. The so-called 'LGBT-free zones' (e.g. in Poland) and the increasing number of attacks against LGBTI people throughout Europe are not compatible with European values.

Furthermore, the community will always have to be informed and challenged. Like the youth, the community needs suitable information on the concepts of living outside of the heteronormative sphere. Education on sexual and gender diversity, as well as visibility of alternative forms of living, will help cope with resentment and stereotypes. Information sharing, e.g. through campaigns, realistic presentations in media or targeted anti-discriminative work, will lead to sensitization on all levels of society. An open social climate will increase the visibility of queer people. It will help support the reduction of fear and prejudice, which will de-dramatise and de-taboo respective forms of living and finally make them a matter of course, ordinary.

There are still very few studies on queer ways of living and their special needs. If science is to take their diversity seriously, it needs various forms of data collection and evaluation. In most cases, existing research concepts have one perspective based on heteronormative views and cisgender norms.

Finally, it should be noted that queer people form an especially vulnerable group within our population. They are more susceptible to loneliness and social influences than the heteronormative community. It is the responsibility of all state powers to respect and care for them; the European Union should ensure that its people are taken care of. It is good to see the intention to change within the European Parliament, however, structural reform of the European Union is needed - so that it can act against member states halting social changes. It would be best for the European Union to form such reform quickly and not be blocked by single member states.

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## Table of Contents

Loneliness is on the horizon	
Abir Al-Jahlani MEP	
	5
Lonely Europeans	
Milosz Hodun	
	7
The Loss of Common Ground and Values	
Joost Rörelaers	
	20
Liberalism and Loneliness. A Philosophical Point of View	
Beatrice Magni	
	27
Psychological Aspects of Loneliness	
Michał Janicki, Michał Tęcza	
	40
All Costs of Loneliness	
Felicita Medved	
	57
The Loneliness of Followers. Artificial People in Synthetic Media	
Ada Florentyna Pawlak	
	75
Countering Loneliness by Strengthening Communities	
Luca Volpe	
	96
Loneliness Among the Youth and Queer People	
Julian Kull	
	112
Authors	
	120
Publishers	
	123





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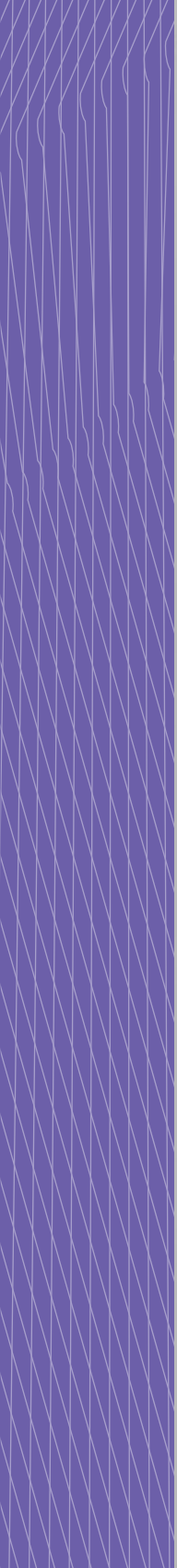
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