1. WHY IS LONELINESS DIFFICULT TO DETECT?

INTRODUCTION

Detecting loneliness implies a series of difficulties linked to various psychological and sociocultural phenomena. When identifying loneliness, these elements must be taken into account in order to achieve the aim of guaranteeing equal opportunities for everyone who uses assistance services and empowering people and communities to tackle the issue.

In this section, we will examine some of these difficulties, while reflecting on the influence of the dominant culture on the expression of loneliness, analysing the psychosocial components behind the complexity of the problem and offering some ideas that could contribute towards improving the detection process.

THE CULTURE OF SUCCESS. HIDDEN LONELINESS

Feeling bad is frowned upon. The **culture of permanent well-being** and the quest for happiness mask any manifestation of unease that deviates from the perfect, plausible, praiseworthy images we see on social media.

Though we are living in the time with most opportunities for connection in human history, the relationships generated thanks to the virtual world are not always built according to parameters that facilitate intimacy, mutual care, bonding or the validation of non-normative representations of social success. Herein lies the paradox (Nardone, 2021) of feeling at our loneliest at the moment in history when opportunities for contact are most numerous.

Connection through social media or in the virtual world does not necessarily imply the creation of a real bond. We are experiencing the paradox of feeling lonelier than ever at the moment in history when we have the most opportunities to contact people.

Social desirability as a need for approval – and the belief that this can be obtained through culturally appropriate, acceptable behaviours – has always been a characteristic of human societies. Nonetheless, it can become a source of distress when recognition is only achieved this way in day-to-day life (Nardone, 2021). One obstacle in detecting loneliness is therefore its concealment, or the underlying shame at failing to 'achieve' a connection with the world in the way dictated by prevailing models.

Third-generation psychological therapies have taken a contextual analysis approach and delved into how the effects of 'feeling good' as a dominant culture have shunned certain feelings, thoughts or private events, resulting in these being considered negative, abnormal, unbalanced. Feeling bad and believing that you are mentally healthy are not concepts that form a cultural pair in social terms (Wilson; Luciano, 2021). With this backdrop, normalising feeling lonely at any time in life is not easy. **Suffering is stigmatised** and associated with failure, rather than being viewed as part of the human condition.

Loneliness is no exception to this, and any expression of it is met with a barrier in mass culture that puts any dissatisfaction with relationships and emotional suffering down to personal failure, an inability to fit in, or dysfunctionality. The pathologisation of unease also affects the feeling of loneliness: rather than being validated as an issue that can affect anyone at any time in life, it becomes hard to express and gets hidden.

Whether it is feeling a lack of social or intimate support at times when you need others; finding yourself without connections in a broken community; noticing that your connection with the world or with your identity is weak; or experiencing the existential abyss of loneliness after a significant loss, it is safe to say that, in a culture of self-sufficiency, no one wants to feel lonely.

The idea of **vulnerability being inherent to human beings**, explored extensively by bioethics from an anthropological standpoint, is now accepted by few. The cultural tradition surrounding us – one that promotes individualism and competition – has pushed fragility and interdependence into the background, hiding the fact that being vulnerable is an intrinsic part of human nature (Feito, 2007). Taking this further, the fact that knowing and accepting that we are *vulnerable* provides us with strength to deal with complex situ-

ations ends up getting ignored. Instead of being an effective shield, the illusion of invulnerability sabotages the very response that should provide us with real protection (Brown, 2016).

Viewed from another angle, **vulnerability (from a sociopolitical perspective)** can be described as the presence of unfavourable conditions that expose people or groups to more risks (Feito, 2007). Increasingly precarious living conditions, deepening inequalities and series of multiple intersecting oppressions that generate complex living situations without support or resources to help to cope with them **conceal loneliness behind other life issues that accumulate or suddenly appear**.

Having to satisfy one's basic human needs (shelter, food, physical health) in a context with few resources can lead to emotional needs being relegated to the bottom of the list of personal priorities. Thus, in a care model that only responds to social emergencies (due to principles or limited possibilities), loneliness is passed over as a second- or third-rate need, overtaken by other more objectifiable issues, which undoubtedly generate large pockets of exclusion in today's society and must be tackled.

The strategic decision to **deal with loneliness through public policies** made by contemporary cities, with a perspective based on complexity, sensitivity and transversality, is a shift away from the prevailing neglect of the issue. It prioritises the public's emotional health, efforts to combat stigma, and the construction of strong communities that act as a network in times of difficulty.

Recognising the complexity of loneliness as a psychosocial issue is a fair, realistic first step to be taken in order to know how to approach identifying it and do so while considering individualisation, diversity and the veils that conceal it.

Below is an analysis of some of the factors involved and proposals for approaching loneliness, with our eyes and ears wide open to detect it and keeping in mind the difficulties we can encounter when providing assistance day to day.

ELEMENTS THAT EXPLAIN THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ISSUE

Loneliness is a complex issue fuelled by individual structural and sociocultural factors. Detecting it requires consideration of subjective elements that are not always easy to take into account in the assistance cycle, for reasons associated with various elements. Some of these are cultural, others are linked to how services work, while others still are related to the nature of the issue.

**Loneliness is a complex issue fuelled by individual structural and sociocultural factors.
Detecting it requires consideration of subjective elements.**

What are the core aspects of this complexity? How can we consider them in our practice? What kind of perspective is required to open up our senses to loneliness?

We will explore two key aspects of the inherent difficulty in detecting loneliness on a psychosocial level: the **subjectivity** of the feeling and the **stigma** surrounding it.

A. SUBJECTIVITY

One of the leading theorists in the study of loneliness from a cognitive perspective, John Cacioppo (2008), made a key distinction (mentioned above) in order to clarify what we are referring to when we talk about loneliness: the difference between being alone and being lonely.

Loneliness can be detected by the person's subjective perceptions: it is the feeling of loneliness that explains the anguish, unease, emotions and negative thoughts around the issue, and not objective elements like the composition of the person's network or frequency of contact (though these can undoubtedly be relevant risk factors that ring alarm bells on an individual, group or community level).

Ultimately, in all cases, **we have to know how the person feels**, how they see their situation, and what effects it has on their emotional and social well-being.

From a psychological perspective, anguish and dissatisfaction are caused by a situation of solitude when the cognitive evaluation of existing relationships and those that the person would like gives a negative result. This generates **cognitive dissonance**: when the proximity and intimacy a person would like do not match the proximity and intimacy they have (de Jong Gierveld, 1987; Peplau; Perlman, 1982).

Cognitive dissonance model for loneliness

| PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY **DESIRED** | → | PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY **ACHIEVED** | = | **UNWANTED LONELINESS** |

Source: Martínez and Celdrán (2019). According to Peplau and Perlman's model (1982),

Other authors who study loneliness, such as Javier Yanguas, deem this cognitive perspective insufficient, indicating that, though it is interesting, it is not enough to understand what loneliness is and means to humans in depth (Yanguas, 2021). This author, a pioneer in research into loneliness, offers nuances that enrich a cognitive vision that is perhaps excessively arithmetical.

He argues that some elements relating to subjectivity build a **more complex perspective of loneliness**. These elements are as follows (Yanguas, 2021):

- Loneliness makes us feel **isolated**, as though we are in a bubble. Feelings of isolation are an intrinsic part of this (subjective) experience.

- Unease and **feelings** of sadness, melancholy, frustration, shame, abandonment and emptiness emerge.

- The **need for intimacy** is behind the feeling. This is not about just being with people, but also the quality of the relationship.

- The relevance of loss, transitions and absences throughout the life cycle. Lack of **life plans**.

- Suffering deriving from separation, incomprehension, **rejection**.

- A feeling of **vulnerability** caused by situations that are too much for us due to a lack of resources or social support.

- A lack of **connection to the place** where one lives. This connection provides a sense of belonging, affinity with others, emotional safety, mutual influence, a perception of sharing values and resources, etc. An absence of connection leads to feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness can be described as a feeling, and as such, it is subjective. Detecting it requires a willingness to observe, to listen actively and to build a personal bond during detection, as well as the creation of operating conditions within services that allow space for a bond to be developed (Martínez, 2022).

- **Opportunities for diverse expressions to emerge** must be given through conversation, words, interaction and the multiplication of voices through networking. We cannot only respond to objective factors or wait for fixed statements that express a request for action to reduce this feeling. Sometimes, time and joint action from various professionals will be required in order to grasp this subjectivity.

- It is important to pay attention to **indirect verbalisations** of loneliness that can occur in the assistance process, such as 'I don't have anyone' or 'I don't know who to turn to', when recording someone's social background. They can indicate that the person is in a situation of risk of loneliness. We must be attentive to the emergence of these signs, by listening carefully and using dialogue dynamics, where appropriate, to find out how the person feels about this.

- Looking **beyond the textual or verbal information** is key. Indirect indicators, such as those linked to the service (not giving a reference person for the personal network, sensing that the visit is an opportunity for the person to talk to someone), give us valuable information on a lack of opportunities for connecting and communication needs.

- It is essential to find out **how the situation makes the person feel** and how they want to deal with it. Simply drawing up a sociogram or genogram, detecting risk factors or observing the occurrence of a life transition without company or support is not enough. At the same time, and from a subjective perspective, a person having support or a large network does not guarantee that they do not feel lonely. We must pay attention to personal evaluation and perception, thoughts and associated emotions.

B. STIGMA

Loneliness and suffering carry a heavy negative stigma in society today. Fighting stigma is key in order to encourage people to express their feelings and accept help.

On a theoretical level, Erving Goffman (1963) – a pioneering sociologist in symbolic interactionism – defines stigma as 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance'. The stigma associated with mental health, for example, turns a person with mental health issues into someone 'different', with negative connotations (Muñoz *et al*., 2020).

Fighting stigma is key in order to encourage people to express their feelings and accept help.

It is in this direction that a Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness that deals with the complexity of the issue has the potential of exercising a normalising force, by recognising that public policies are doing something, that loneliness is socially accepted as a collective issue, that the expression of this feeling is valid and that tailor-made opportunities to help city residents to connect are offered.

As the Complutense University of Madrid's guide, *Guía de buenas prácticas contra el estigma* (Muñoz *et al*., 2020), indicates in a necessary theoretical review, stigma is not inside people. Instead, it is a label or allocation imposed by others, within a system of power relations, on a person or a group.

Three interrelated directions in which the stigma around loneliness operates can be distinguished.

- Firstly, it **blames individuals** for the situation that is generating a feeling of loneliness. Believing that people choose their own life trajectory in a free society with equal opportunities for all individuals throughout life leads to a perception of situations of loneliness as a deserved condition, brought on by unwise life choices.

This belief is built on an internal attribution, from an individualist paradigm, of the responsibility we have in the life choices we make and on the creation of a story of failure behind the feeling that ignores the structural causes of loneliness in contemporary society (reviewed in previous capsules in this course). Prejudices like 'they must be alone for a reason' generate discrimination (in the stereotypes-prejudices-discrimination triad examined by social psychology) and social shame and make it difficult to express emotions, for fear of being blamed.

- Secondly, **the prejudice that views psychological suffering** as indicative of vulnerability conceals the expression of loneliness and adjacent emotions (emptiness, angst, sadness, abandonment...). The trivialisation and simplification of positive psychology (used superfluously in marketing and advertising) and the culture of constant happiness hamper the normalisation of negative emotions, thus preventing people from recognising their own loneliness.

  Feeling good is not as important as looking like you feel good, which conceals issues like loneliness even further. Some authors (Wilson; Luciano, 2021) refer to this as the tyranny of the image of well-being. Suffering is avoided, and there are recipes of all kinds for living a full life, but this avoidance can have destructive effects, including the frustration caused by the perception that emotions like sadness are not normalised.

- Though the source of stigma can be the stigmatising person or society, from the **perspective of the stigmatised person** (Muñoz *et al.*, 2020), other, internal mechanisms are in operation: self-stigma, for example, which must be considered when exploring the complexity of detection. This is the part of the stigma that grows inside the stigmatised person, generating negative feelings. This negative self-perception can be paralysing and harm both the person's perception of self-efficacy and their ability to recover.

▷   **Interiorisation** occurs in accordance with a model with **four successive levels** (examples of which are found below): (1) knowledge of stereotypes, (2) approval of stereotype, (3) interiorisation of stigma, and finally, (4) damage caused to self-esteem and self-efficacy by the interiorisation of the stigma (Corrigan; Rao, 2012, as cited in Muñoz *et al.*, 2020).

| LEVELS OF INTERIORISATION	EXAMPLE OF MATERNITY
Knowledge of the stereotype	'Women feel complete when they become mothers'.
Approval of the stereotype	'I think that, when I become a mother, I'll feel complete and satisfied'.
Interiorisation of the stigma	'I'm a mother, so I should feel complete and satisfied'.
Damage to self-esteem and self-efficacy	'I'm a mother and I feel lonely, so I'm not a good enough woman and I don't know how to be a good mother'.

Source. Original

Some ideas for **building a space of trust free from prejudices** – adapted from and based on the publication *Detectar la soledat durant l'envelliment. Una guia* (Martínez, 2022) – are listed below:

1. Pointing out the **structural causes** of loneliness can help to reduce the feeling of guilt and shame. A lack of time for social relationships, time spent caring for someone intensively, an inaccessible environment and the deterioration of community relations in neighbourhoods are all factors that could make someone feel lonely.

2. **Encouraging emotional expression**, as far as possible, and reversing the negative weight assigned to loneliness. Feeling lonely at some point in life is normal, and we should be able to show it without fearing prejudice.

3. **Not judging**: this is the starting point for breaking down barriers when someone asks for help, as blaming generates shame and hiding (among family members and loved ones, too, who do not want to express the limits of their support). If a family member cannot give the required support, they might want to avoid asking for help so that this does not become known.

4. **Not treating the person as vulnerable**, as this can push them to withdraw. The use of infantilising language can lead to the person taking on a passive role and not getting involved in changing the situation that is bothering them.

5. The social perception of loneliness influences how it is experienced. An **empowering dialogue** must be created to help to help bring about change and encourage the person to accept and deal with the problem.

To combat stigma and consider subjectivity as an essential element in the detection process while encouraging communication that builds a connection, some important steps are to INVESTIGATE without invading, ASSESS without labelling, and ASK without directing.

In the following capsules, we will look at some tools and signs that can be taken into account in order to detect loneliness in accordance with these principles.
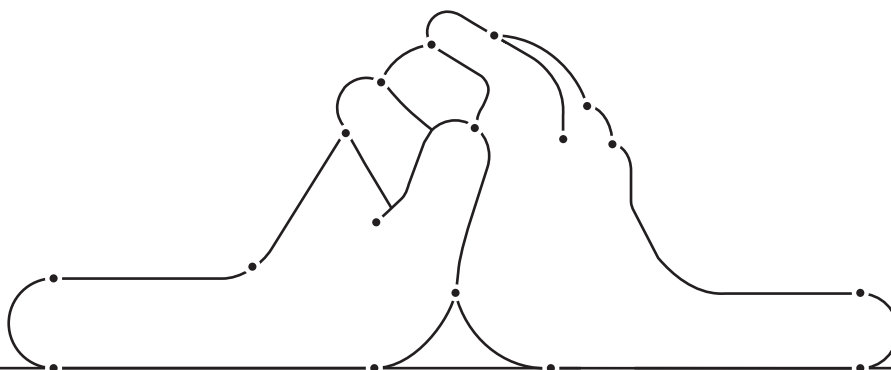
KEY IDEAS AND SUMMARY

Loneliness is complex and difficult to detect and identify for a series of reasons, including: the culture of constant well-being, its relationship with 'relational dysfunction', feelings of guilt and difficulties in seeing ourselves as vulnerable, as human beings.

Two of the main elements that explain the complexity of the construct are subjectivity and the associated stigma.

As these aspects make loneliness difficult to detect, the following is required:

- Starting out with a willingness to observe, to listen actively and to build a bond (service operating conditions must facilitate the creation of space for a bond to be developed).

- Building a space of trust, free from prejudices, to facilitate detection.