INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is inherent to human existence. It is an enigma and responses to it must be built slowly and carefully. In the twenty-first century, though consensus has not yet been reached regarding this phenomenon, there is no question that loneliness plays a key role in the construction and development both of people as individuals and of societies as a whole. Zygmunt Bauman (2020) explains how we have gone from living in a society characterised by solid structures to living in a kind of 'liquid modernity', in which instability, a lack of cohesion and precarious relationships signal that loneliness is no longer a purely individual problem and has become a social issue. The prevalence of loneliness and its proven impact on people's health and quality of life pose a lot of questions that must be answered by public policies and social action.

In fact, loneliness has already started to be included on the political agenda. One international milestone with a considerable impact was Theresa May's creation of the Ministry for Loneliness in the United Kingdom, which led other countries to explore different strategies on a national scale, and on a regional, provincial and local scale. This constitutes a big step forward in the design of public policies, as they are going beyond the coverage of basic needs to include 'emotional well-being' as an important element, in order to improve people's quality of life and welfare. Nonetheless, this process involves a number of challenges, both on a more substantive level – in the design of public policies – and in operational terms, at the planning and management stages. To this end, the Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness (hereinafter, the Strategy or MSAL) has emerged as an operational response, with a ten-year horizon, that includes a monitoring system that is flexible enough to adapt measures and initiatives in accordance with the reality at any given time.

That being said, loneliness is often confused with other concepts, such as social isolation, with which it is often linked but is not necessarily intertwined. On more than one occasion, the two have generated alarm and headlines when associated together, sometimes in a tendentious fashion, and have led to confusion or, worse, placed the blame on the sufferers and/or their family. Furthermore, using these concepts interchangeably causes confusion from both an analysis standpoint and an intervention perspective. Therefore, though they are closely linked, they must be distinguished from one another, so that we may understand the two phenomena in today's society, develop effective tools for detecting both types of situation, and design appropriate interventions.

Loneliness is no longer an individual phenomenon: it is a social issue

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social isolation is characterised by a lack or limited existence of lasting interpersonal relationships and can be measured by the density of the person's social network, meaning the number of people it contains and the degree to which its members are interconnected. As it refers to a specific structure (the social network), it corresponds to an objective reality.

The most commonly used tool to measure social isolation is the Lubben Scale. According to James Lubben himself, a person is isolated or at risk of isolation when they have relationships with less than two people. Other reports and studies deem that a person is isolated when they have contact with one person or less per month.

In general, from an intervention point of view, we can differentiate between two types of isolation:

● Situational isolation: temporary situations that can cause the social network to shrink for a certain period of time.

● Chronic isolation: the continued absence of social connections creates a situation of chronic isolation.

According to Beach and Bandford (2014), the main difference between loneliness and social isolation lies in the fact that social isolation implies being alone, whereas loneliness occurs because you do not like this situation. According to other authors, feelings of loneliness are subjective and composed of the way a person perceives, experiences and evaluates their own social isolation and lack of communication with others (De Jong-Gierveld; Raadschelders, 1982).

As specified in the Strategy, it is important to remember that people in a situation of social isolation are not necessarily lonely and that, objectively, not all people who feel lonely are socially isolated. In fact, people with an active social life can feel lonely.
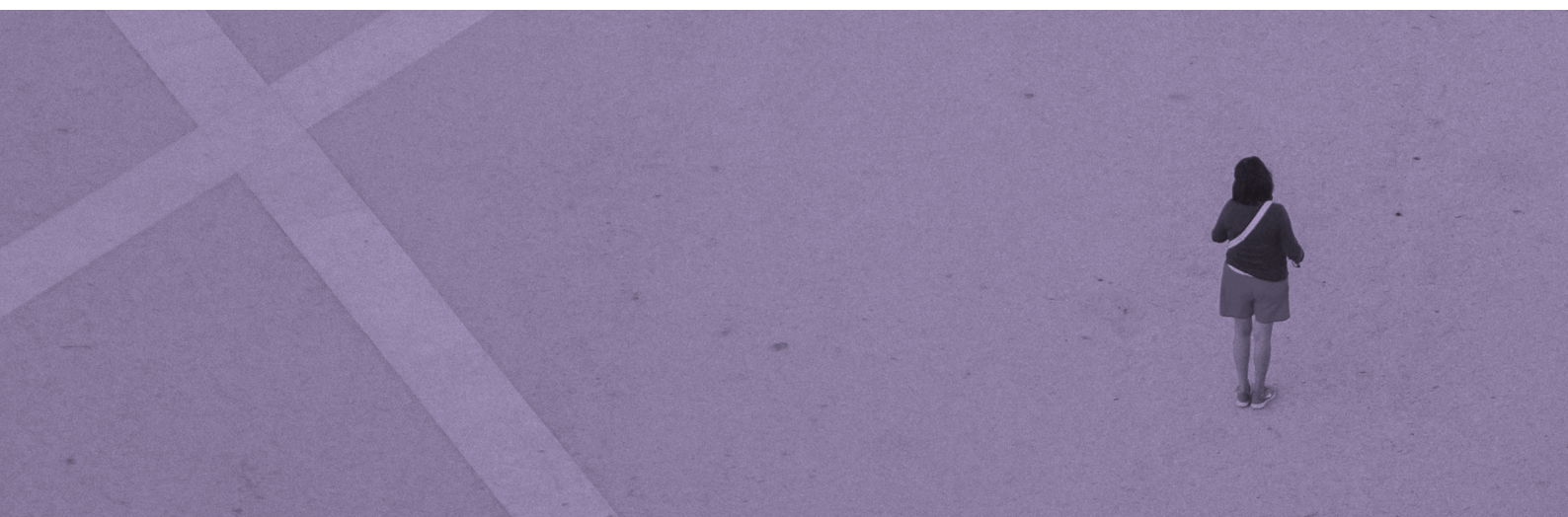
LONELINESS

Unlike isolation, loneliness is a complex construct that, thanks to multiple theoretical approaches, has generated various debates over time. It has mainly been examined from the viewpoint of psychology, and just like other psychological concepts, we still struggle to conceptualise it and understand it as part of human existence.

Empirical research in this area started to take shape in the 1980s. It is worth noting here that this time saw the emergence of new phenomena relating to isolation and loneliness that generated significant social changes and attracted interest from various disciplines. These include an exponential increase in divorce rates, in the number of single-person homes and in the prevalence of widowhood in old age.
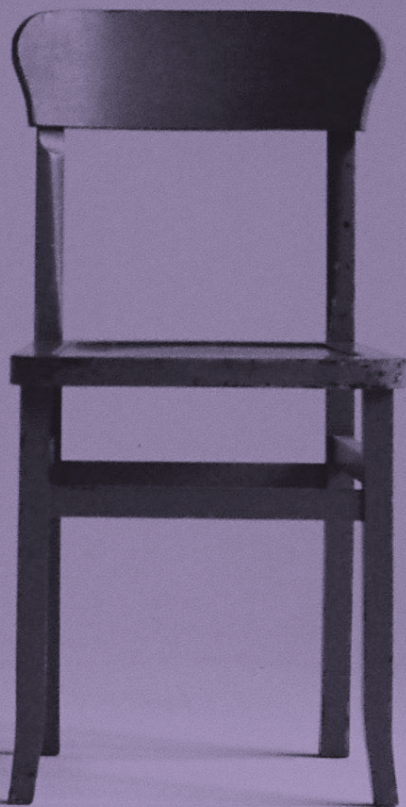
Among all the theoretical and practical contributions of that period, one of the most noteworthy is *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy* (Peplau; Perlman, 1982), and it continues to be one of the main works in this field. This compilation aimed to consider the complexity of loneliness when conceptualising the phenomenon and categorised it through eight theoretical approaches, which, according to Yanguas et al. (2018), can be reduced to four. Still, loneliness is a complex phenomenon and psychological construct based on subjective perception. For this reason, each of these theoretical approaches has different limitations and has been criticised for various reasons. These theoretical approaches and the corresponding criticisms are summarised in the table here.

THEORY	APPROACH	CRITICISM/LIMITATIONS
EXISTENTIAL	Loneliness is an experience that is inherent to human nature. On one hand, it can be a painful experience. On the other, it provides an opportunity to create new things, to reflect and to understand oneself. It is necessary for personal growth.	This theory has been criticised because, according to existentialists, everyone is solitary, yet at no point do they recognise the choice people can make regarding this condition. No distinction is made between objective solitude and subjective loneliness or between when being alone is enjoyable and when it is painful.
PSYCHODYNAMIC	Loneliness is the negative result of the need for intimacy and interpersonal relationships in order to live.	This is a widely criticised approach because the conceptualisations it proposes are based on clinical cases and pay no attention to the influence of social environment, culture and age in the development of the feeling of loneliness.
INTERACTIONIST	Loneliness appears as a consequence of a lack of significant and/or intimate relationships (with attachment) and/or as a result of a lack of sense of community or a reduced social network. Loneliness is not caused by the objective fact of being alone.	It has been criticised because it deems that the concept of social loneliness does not necessarily imply that associated negative feelings must emerge. In other words, in this theory, social loneliness is closer to the concept of social isolation. The causes of loneliness are boiled down to a reduced social network and loss of attachment figures, and it ignores other factors like age, culture and gender.
COGNITIVE	Loneliness is understood as a discrepancy between the social relationships that a person desires and those they actually have. It explains the development of the phenomenon by taking into account situational and environmental aspects, as well as behavioural aspects of the individual's personality.	This approach is limited because it does not consider the effects of culture on the development of loneliness, it cannot explain the loneliness felt by people with cognitive decline, and it does not take into account the importance of social networks and support to ease the effects of loneliness.

Source: Original, using data from Yanguas et al., 2018

A few years later, a second manual – *Loneliness Theory, Research and Applications* – would be published and go one step further by providing an empirical perspective and acknowledging the importance of measuring loneliness. It was precisely in this period that the main instruments for measuring loneliness were created, such as the De Jong Gierveld (1985) and UCLA (1978) scales.

Nonetheless, even today, loneliness continues to be a subject on which there is no unanimity among scholars. For this reason, a list of definitions and descriptions, in which the different authors name the different aspects of loneliness, is provided here. All of them are complementary and not mutually exclusive:

WEISS, 1983. Loneliness is a natural phenomenon and a feeling that can affect any of us and appear at any time in life. It can occur regardless of age, gender or any other socio-demographic characteristic.

YOUNG, 1982. Young differentiates between different types of loneliness according to their duration: chronic loneliness (2 years or more), situational loneliness (related to a loss) and transient loneliness (short episodes of loneliness).

PEPLAU and PERLMAN, 1982. They define loneliness as a negative psychological response to a discrepancy between actual relationships and desired relationships.

DE JONG GIERVELD, 1987. This author views loneliness as an individual feeling characterised by an unpleasant or unacceptable lack of quality in a series of social relationships. This can occur because the quantity of social contact is less than what the person would want, or because there is not enough intimacy in the relationships.
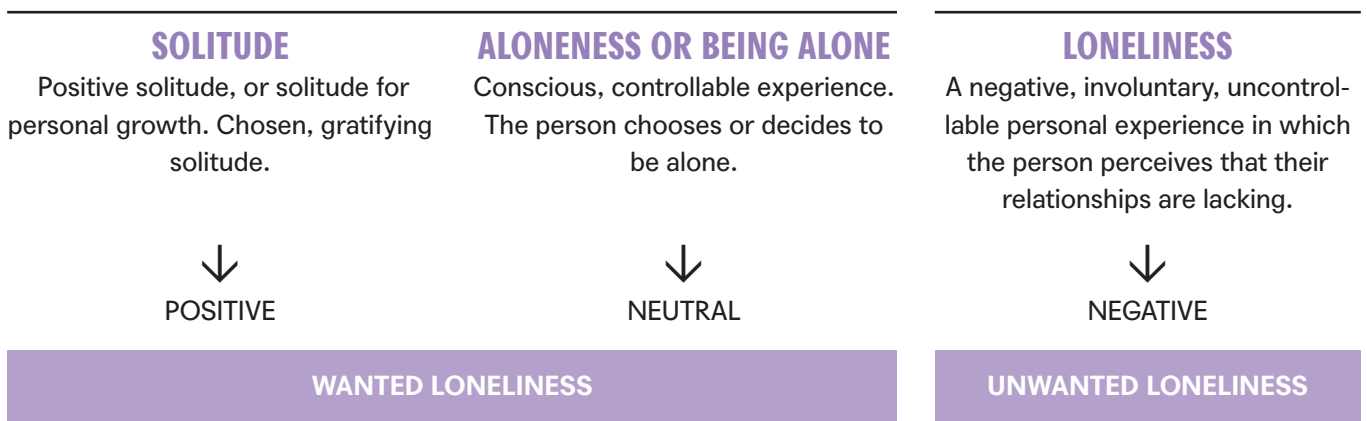
HAWKLEY and CACIOPPO, 2009. These scholars distinguish between different types of loneliness. Acute loneliness is a temporary state that ends when the circumstances that caused it are remedied. Chronic loneliness refers to an individual's trait resulting from the interaction between their life circumstances and a genetic tendency towards experiencing feelings of isolation. The duration of the feeling of loneliness has a direct impact on how it is experienced.

MUSHTAQ et al., 2014; HAWKLEY and CAPINTANIO, 2015. Loneliness is subjectively defined as a painful experience, experienced due to an absence of social relationships or feelings of belonging, or because of a feeling of isolation.

LUANAIGH and LAWLOR, 2008. They make the distinction between normal and pathological loneliness. They differ based on their duration, frequency (occasional or persistent) and severity.

BERMEJO, 2005. Loneliness is a subjective experience that occurs when our relationships are not sufficient or are not what we would hope them to be.

It is also important to remember that solitude is not necessarily negative, while loneliness is. In English, we have different words to describe the state of being alone according to whether it is viewed as positive, neutral or negative.

SOLITUDE	ALONENESS OR BEING ALONE	LONELINESS
Positive solitude, or solitude for personal growth. Chosen, gratifying solitude.	Conscious, controllable experience. The person chooses or decides to be alone.	A negative, involuntary, uncontrollable personal experience in which the person perceives that their relationships are lacking.
↓	↓	↓
POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	NEGATIVE
WANTED LONELINESS		UNWANTED LONELINESS

Source. Sala Mozos, E. 2020

In the languages of Barcelona – Catalan and Spanish – meanwhile, the words 'soledat' and 'solitud' tend to be used as synonyms, according to the Real Academia Española and the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, regardless of whether the meaning is positive, negative or neutral. Therefore, the word 'wanted' ('desitjada'/'volguda') or 'unwanted' ('no desitjada'/'no volguda') is added to differentiate between neutral or positive types of solitude and loneliness, the latter of which implies a negative personal experience and requires intervention.

Within the Strategy, the term loneliness refers to the subjective experience resulting from the discrepancy between, on one hand, the quality and quantity of one's relationships, and on the other, one's personal standards for social relationships: in other words, between what one has and what one considers ideal. Loneliness is therefore considered a negative expression of feelings that can manifest in individuals of all ages (MSAL, 2020).

As it is a subjective experience, there are no two same kinds of loneliness, and identifying common traits between them is difficult. As a result, unlike social isolation, detecting loneliness and taking action to tackle it is a complex process.

Loneliness is a subjective experience; there are as many types of loneliness as there are causes of it. That is why it is complex, plural and diverse. An experience shaped by different realities.

A. THE DIMENSIONS OF LONELINESS

In the early 1980s, Robert Weiss, one of the most renowned authors in the field, highlighted the conceptual difference between two dimensions of loneliness for the first time in his book *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, indicating that they may or may not coexist in one person:

- **Social loneliness.** This is the subjective response to the lack or insufficiency of relationships or sense of community. It refers to the person's perception of the size of their network, their interest in it and/or their view of whether it is attractive enough for them to feel part of the group (feeling of belonging).

- **Emotional loneliness.** This is the subjective response to an absence of intimate personal relationships or bonds, whether these be with friends or a partner.

As specified in the MSAL, emotional loneliness often occurs following the loss of a partner, whether through separation or death. Social loneliness, meanwhile, can easily arise during migration processes or when moving away, for example. Both types of loneliness are associated with feelings of depression and dissatisfaction, but the emotional kind is normally accompanied by anxiety, while social loneliness often comes with boredom and a feeling of exclusion (Pinazo Hernandis, 2018).

These two dimensions of loneliness are linked to the more relational aspect of loneliness. However, though loneliness includes a significant relational component, it is not only connected to relationships. Other variables also interact with the feeling, such as fragility or the meaning of life. That is why we consider another dimension of loneliness:

- **Existential loneliness.** This is the basic feeling of loneliness that can emerge when we, as human beings, face the fact that we are alone in the world, even though there are other people around us (Mayers; Svartberg, 2001). It is a type of loneliness that is linked to the human condition, is characterised by a feeling of alienation and emptiness, and can act as a catalyst for personal growth.

KEY IDEAS AND SUMMARY

Loneliness and isolation are two separate phenomena that can be related, but not necessarily.

As it is a subjective experience, there are as many types of loneliness as there are causes. That is why **loneliness is complex, plural and diverse**. An experience shaped by different realities (Víctor; Sullivan, 2015).

Loneliness can be the **result of a combination of many factors or variables**, some of which are objective, others, subjective. Some of these variables relate to intrapersonal elements, such as expectations, coping strategies, etc. Others, meanwhile, are linked to external factors (structural and socioeconomic factors, cultural values, etc.).

Personal expectations can be an important determining factor in the experience of loneliness and are often highly conditioned by culture. For example, according to the results of *Loneliness – An Unequally Shared Burden in Europe. Science for Policy Brief* (EC, 2018), indexes of social isolation are higher in the north and west of Europe than in the east and south. However, loneliness rates are higher in the south and east of Europe than in the rest of the continent. One of the factors that explain this trend could be precisely the fact that people expect a lot more from family and social relationships in the south and east than in the rest of Europe.

Loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon and includes **a significant relational component, but it is not solely linked to relationships**. Elements like fragility and the meaning of life, among others, can also affect the feeling of loneliness.

There are three dimensions of loneliness: emotional loneliness and social loneliness, which are two aspects of the more relational side of the phenomenon, and existential loneliness.

Loneliness involves **emotions** like sadness, melancholy, frustration and shame, which are associated with pain, but it can also be seen as a catalyst for the person to grow and learn. It can be an important factor in the process of personal growth.

Loneliness is a feeling that is **difficult to detect and identify for various reasons**. Firstly, it is perceived differently by people who suffer from it and by those who do not. In general, there is still a great deal of stigma around loneliness, and the blame for the situation tends to fall on the people who feel lonely, with no consideration of more objective, structural factors. Secondly, it is not even easy to recognise or identify in oneself. Finally, it is a feeling that can lead to emotions such as shame and/or guilt, especially when the person who feels lonely is actually surrounded by people.

In short, loneliness is a complex construct that includes individual, family and community interactions, that involves objective elements and subjective perceptions, and that is influenced by individual behaviours and cultural expectations while being affected by external, social and structural factors. It also has a considerable impact on health (Sala Mozos, 2019).
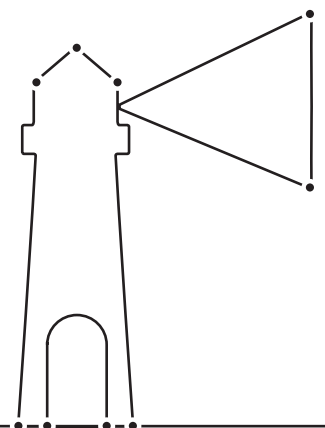
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