

Commentary:

**WHERE IS THE PLACE FOR LONELINESS?
A COMMENTARY ON
"LONELINESS: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH"**

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Abstract

In this commentary on Lars Christian Søndery (2013; see this present issue of JISS), I distinguish between normative loneliness that can be experienced either positively as an opportunity for creativity, emotional growth, and maturity or negatively as a painful and separating experience, and a pathological loneliness lacking this distinction. Using developmental literature from psychoanalytic studies I argue that normal loneliness plays an important role in personal growth. However, the current cultural over determination on connectedness as opposed to relatedness has meant that this normative process has forgotten and loneliness seen only negatively.

Keywords: loneliness, psychoanalysis, development,
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COMMENTARY

*"In order to be open to creativity, one must have
the capacity for constructive use of solitude.
One must overcome the fear of being alone."*

- Rollo May

In his informative article Lars Christian Søndery (2013; see this present issue of JISS) explores the various ways contemporary societies have come to understand and define the experience of loneliness. He offers three different, but complementary conceptualizations of loneliness. These include: (1) A social needs approach derived from attachment theory and psychodynamic literature emphasizing the affective experience of loneliness as an interpersonal phenomena. (2) A cognitive approach focusing on the discrepancies between desired and wished for interactions and actual ones. (3) And finally an existential/phenomenological account considering the subjective experience of man's existence as fundamentally isolated. Additionally, Søndery is interested in and sensitive to the way modern cultures emphasis on individuality may promotes the experience loneliness (pp. 4-7).

Deconstructing loneliness into these groups enables Søndery to synthesize an integrative approach towards understanding loneliness as a comprehensive, multidimensional experience entailing affective, cognitive, and subjective aspects. This provides a valuable and non-reductive view of loneliness, which:

"As a phenomenon has a core experience separate from others, but at the same time is combined by a set of reactions, causes and feelings. These reactions, causes and feelings are then guided by cultural structures and positions that point experienced loneliness towards specific individual understandings of the phenomenon" (p. 20).

Considered in this fashion, loneliness primarily entails separateness from others and the thoughts, feelings, subjective experiencing, and antecedent events that go along with it. Cultural structures, such as the Western emphasis on individuality direct specific understandings of these experiences. Interestingly, throughout the paper these understandings are described almost exclusively negatively as something undesirable, painful, and even pathological. This singular consideration of loneliness highlights the constitutive power of the culture in guiding and shaping the meanings applied to experience.

Søndery acknowledges this throughout the paper. For instance, he comments upon how the experience of loneliness often depends upon the specific context. He writes, "on the one hand it can be argued that the loneliness experienced by a widow longing for her late husband is different from the young man sitting alone on a Friday

night longing for some social interaction” (p. 19). Context appears to have the power in creating similar but different experiences of loneliness. Specifically, the meanings attached to the feelings may be different. The widow longs for her late husband with the knowledge that he can never come back, whereas the young man longs for social interactions that are potentially attainable. The meanings attached to events play an important role in guiding future experiences helping to anticipate how meanings will be made in the future (Valsiner, 2007; Bruner, 1990).

In this brief commentary I aim to build off the distinction between different types of loneliness to suggest that there are positive aspects of loneliness as well as negative. This can be understood as an attempt to distinguish between loneliness as a basic aspect of human experience and relationships (also referred to as solitude, separation, cut-offness, and so forth), and loneliness as a more pathological phenomenon. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory and study I offer a developmental account that considers normative loneliness a crucial aspect of maturation. I conclude by suggesting that the current over determination of loneliness as negative reflects current societal trends of connectedness as opposed to relatedness.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN TWO FORMS OF LONELINESS

The psychoanalyst Freida Fromm-Reichmann (1889-1957) distinguishes between two types of loneliness. The first, is a culturally determined loneliness referred to earlier as seclusion, solitude, and cut-offness (1959/1990, p. 306). This type of loneliness can be quite painful but is also likely experienced at some point by almost everyone, and may even be desired and pursued by others such as artists (p. 307). She contrasts this to a second form of loneliness, which she views as pathological referring to it as “real loneliness”. This latter form is negative, not allowing for the possibly creative, regulatory, and developmentally enriching enhancing aspects of more common loneliness. Moreover, the pain of “real loneliness” is incommunicable (pp. 312; 319; 320), defying symbolic expression into language (p. 315). The experience of being gripped by “real loneliness” cannot be communicated, and furthermore when no longer in its clutches, its memory is too painful to be readily expressible. In this respect, she considers it so terrifying that it is avoided at all costs and the fear of becoming lonely may almost be as bad as the experience (p. 316; see also Sullivan, 1953, pp. 260-262). For Fromm-Reichmann “real loneliness” borders upon psychosis (pp. 318; 320) vaguely expressible by poets and philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Buber (p. 319) but notably lacking clear etiology and description.

In attempting to discuss its origins, she considers how it may be connected to the extended profound isolation, either voluntarily experienced by the sailor and explorer/adventure, or involuntary experienced such as by the prison inmate or psychotic (pp. 321-323). Her description highlights the importance of choice and time in

differentiating forms of loneliness (pp. 306-307). While an extensive discussion of these ideas are beyond the scope of this commentary the extent to which one can choose to be alone and for how long are clearly important. Indeed, her writing suggests that loneliness may lie along something of a gradient or degree. Here, the inability to choose how distant to be from others and for how long is reflected in the relative impossibility of communication and likely contributes to what makes "real loneliness" such a negative and destructive experience and normative loneliness a possibly positive and beneficial one. Towards this end, approaching loneliness from the developmental (social needs) perspective may further our understanding of this distinction.

NORMAL LONELINESS DURING DEVELOPMENT

The social needs perspective, locating loneliness as originating from a lack of intimacy in the parent child relationship (pp. 7; 9-10), has its origins in the interpersonal psychiatry of Harry Stack Sullivan, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and Erich Fromm as well as the early attachment research John Bowlby. These theorists considered the interpersonal unit, specifically mother and infant the basis of study. At the time, it presented a radical alternative to more classically Freudian views of development being driven by instinctual and unconscious processes, and the American behaviorist ideas of conditioned learning dominant at the time (Perry, 1982).

Derived from American pragmatism (Perry, 1982), interpersonal psychiatry provides the basis for thinking about how the infant develops in relationship with the mother. Harry Stack Sullivan (1892 – 1949) for instance emphasized that one's personality cannot be isolated from their lived interpersonal relationships and cultural contexts (1953). He based his theory of personality and the self off a complex model of the effects of the interactions between mother and infant (Evans, 1996). His emphasis on the ongoing interactive dynamics between mother and infant is noteworthy, anticipating many later developments in the contemporary infant and attachment research (Beebe & Lachmann, 2003).

Specifically, Sullivan's work foreshadowed dyadic systems approaches of infant-mother attachment and communications. These approaches describe patterns of co-construction between mother and infant or how each party actively interprets the behaviors and actions of the other in order to regulate their own behavior as well as the behavior of the other (Beebe & Lachmann, 1998). Here, mother's are no longer seen as needing to be fully attuned and attentive to every need, but rather responsive to infant communication about the needs for distance as well as for closeness (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, & Bahrack, 2012). Ruptures and repairs are considered normal, with greater emphasis being put onto repairing periods of not being attuned than necessarily remaining attuned. Accordingly, in this model, infant and mother are seen as moving in

and out of periods of interaction and engagement, with a moderate level of stimulation considered optimal (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Buck, Bahrnick, & Chen, 2012).

One way that this can be understood is that the infant needs both feelings of intimacy and connectedness as well as opportunities to down regulate so that they do not become over stimulated and hyper aroused (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, & Bahrnick, 2012). During periods of being "alone" infants can consolidate and integrate gains as well as relax and rest up for future interactions. Developing the capacity to be alone has been described as an important milestone in the maturational development of the infant and especially as it concerns the child's ability to play by themselves (Winnicott, 1958). This capacity reflects the ability to access their internal experience in a creative and self-regulating manner.

It has been suggested that this capacity initially results from the child being to maintain the image or representation of the mother in such a way that the child can be alone while being in the presence of someone else (Winnicott, 1958). These moments, which can be either occurring in the moment-to-moment interactive matrix (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Buck, Bahrnick, & Chen, 2012) or more enduring such as when a infant plays by him or herself with mother nearby, provide a basis for the individual to learn and reconnect with their personal motivation, creativity, and experience (Winnicott, 1958, p. 419). Maintaining the image of the other when alone, has been thought to provide a basis for the capacity to imaginatively know the affective and mental states of self and other, now considered a cornerstone of effective self and interpersonal relating (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Bahrnick, 2012; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, Target, 2002). Indeed, the failure of this capacity to develop has been linked with the development of later pathology (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Buck, Bahrnick, & Chen, 2012).

BEING ALONE

Given the importance of being alone for development and the possibilities periods of solitude provide to engage with creative process, reflective thoughts, self-examination and so forth, how can the rather negative view of loneliness be explained? One way is to follow the S nderby's (2013) lead and look to the constitutive role of culture. He suggests that as modern culture creates greater distance from its environment and from one another a lack of relatedness leading to anxiety and isolation has followed (p. 4). Ironically, modern society has the potential to be connected like never before. Social media, the Internet, cell phones, satellite television all provide opportunities to those who want it (and those who do not) to stay connected at all times, barely requiring the touch of a finger.

Of course, connectedness is not relatedness and in this regard the effects of being able to stay connected are only now being examined. One possibility may be that we have entered into a culturally over determined period of connectedness that does not create

space for solitude, loneliness, anxiety, and perhaps a host of other experiences, considered negative because they intrude upon our daily lives. With regards to loneliness it seems that pathological loneliness as an inability to communicate and the more normative loneliness described earlier has become conflated. Certainly, both forms can be painful, difficult, and unpleasant, but as developmental research indicates the latter not only provides opportunities for creativity and growth, but also is a necessary aspect of human relatedness.

It is not surprising then, that when culture emphasizes connection but not necessarily relation that any threat to connection, such as loneliness is seen as pathology and not an opportunity for growth. Adjusting towards this over determination would seem to require teaching or reemphasizing the capacity to be alone and the value of relations and not just connections.

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