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Chapter 8

Theoretical Approaches to Loneliness

Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau

Over the years, many psychologists and sociologists have offered theoretical remarks on loneliness. For didactic purposes, we will classify these speculations into eight different categories: psychodynamic, phenomenological, existential-humanistic, sociological, interactionist, cognitive, privacy, and systems theory. The purpose of this chapter is to present, compare, and evaluate these theoretical approaches.

Naturally, there are many dimensions on which to compare explanations of loneliness. We will focus on three main issues. First, what is the nature of loneliness itself? Is it a normal or abnormal condition? A positive or a negative experience? Second, what are the causes of loneliness? Do they reside within the person or within the environment? Do they stem from contemporary or historical/developmental influences on behavior? Third, and perhaps somewhat less important, on what evidence (i.e., case histories, systematic research, etc.) or intellectual traditions was the theory formulated?

These comparative presentations must of course be offered for what they are: brief, broad characterizations. The views themselves are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, as we will see, Sermat takes positions consistent with at least two different viewpoints. Nor are the members within each camp always in complete agreement. Furthermore, comparative analysis is made difficult by the fragmentary nature of most of the "theoretical" statements about loneliness. In many cases, proponents of a particular school of psychology have only written a short article on loneliness or touched on it as part of a more general statement of their views.

In the introduction to Chapter 10, Derlega and Margulis note three stages of concept development. In Stage 1, the importance of a concept is justified. In Stage 2, the concept is explored and attempts are made to demonstrate its similarities and differences from other phenomena. Only in Stage 3 do theories emerge. Such theories involve a set of concepts plus a series of logically compatible statements about how the constructs are related to one another. As Derlega and Margulis note, most speculation on loneliness has been at

Stages 1 and 2. Most models for understanding loneliness have been neither fully nor systematically articulated at the level of a true theory.

EIGHT APPROACHES TO LONELINESS

Psychodynamic Models

Although Freud himself did not write about loneliness, several others following in the psychodynamic tradition did (Burton, 1961; Ferreira, 1962; Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Leiderman, 1980; H. Peplau, 1955; Rubins, 1964; Sullivan, 1953; and Zilboorg, 1938).

Zilboorg (1938) published what is probably the first psychological analysis of loneliness. He distinguished being lonesome from being lonely. Being lonesome is a "normal" and "transient state of mind" resulting from missing somebody specific. Loneliness is an overwhelming, persistent experience. No matter what one does, loneliness is an "inner worm" that gnaws at the heart.

According to Zilboorg, loneliness reflects basic traits of narcissism, megalomania, and hostility. The lonely person retains infantile feelings of personal omnipotence, is egocentric, and wants to show off before an audience in order to "show others up." "The lonely individual seldom fails to display an ill-disguised or open hatred" (Zilboorg, 1938, p. 40) directed either inward or outward toward others.

Zilboorg traced the origins of loneliness to the crib. The infant learns the joys of being loved and admired, plus the shock of being a small, weak creature having to wait for others to gratify its needs. Here, says Zilboorg (1938, p. 53), "we have the quintessence of what later becomes a narcissistic orientation . . . . Here [too] is the nucleus of hostility, hatred, and impotent aggression of the lonely."

Sullivan (1953) also saw the roots of adult loneliness in childhood. He postulated a driving need for human intimacy. This need first appears in the infant's desire for contact. In preadolescence, it takes the form of needing a chum, someone with whom to exchange intimate information. Youngsters who lack social skills because of faulty interaction with their parents during childhood are apt to have difficulty forming a chumship. This inability to satisfy the preadolescent need for intimacy can lead to fully-blown loneliness.

Fromm-Reichmann's (1959) article is probably the most widely cited, early paper on loneliness. She acknowledged Sullivan's contribution to her thinking, and agreed with his view that loneliness is an "exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience." Based on her work with schizophrenics, Fromm-Reichmann (p. 3) claimed that loneliness is an extreme state: "The kind of loneliness I am discussing is nonconstructive . . . [and it] leads ultimately to the development of psychotic states. It renders people . . . emotionally

paralyzed and helpless." Like Sullivan and Zilboorg, Fromm-Reichmann also traced the origins of loneliness to childhood experiences. In particular, she noted the harmful consequences of "premature weaning from mothering tenderness."

In terms of our three comparative concerns, the position of psychodynamic theorists is clear. Their observations on loneliness stemmed largely from their work in clinical settings. Perhaps because of this, they are prone to see loneliness as pathological. Probably more so than any other group, psychodynamically oriented theorists attribute loneliness to early influences. While these early experiences may have been interpersonal in nature, the focus of this tradition is on how factors within the individual (i.e., traits and intrapsychic conflicts) lead to loneliness.

Rogers' Phenomenological Perspective

Carl Rogers, who developed client-centered therapy, is the most noted proponent of a phenomenological perspective (see also Whitehorn, 1961). Rogers twice addressed the issue of loneliness (1961, 1970/1973), and his analysis reflects his "self theory" of personality. Rogers assumes that society pressures the individual to act in restricted, socially approved ways. This leads to a discrepancy between one's true inner self and the self manifested to others. Merely performing society's roles, no matter how adequately done, leads to an empty existence.

Loneliness occurs when individuals, having dropped their defenses to get in touch with their inner selves, nonetheless expect rejection from others. As expressed by Rogers (1970/1973, p. 119):

> Loneliness . . . . is sharpest and most poignant in the individual who has, for one reason or another, found himself standing, without some of his customary defences, a vulnerable, frightened, lonely but *real* self, sure of rejection in a judgmental world.

According to Rogers (1970/1973, p. 121), the belief that their real selves are unlovable "keeps people locked in their loneliness." Fear of rejection leads people to persist in their social facades and so to continue feeling empty.

Based on such views, others (Moore, 1976) have derived the hypothesis that a discrepancy between one's actual and idealized self should result in loneliness. Eddy's (1961) doctoral dissertation supported this prediction.

Like the psychodynamically oriented theorists, Rogers' analysis of loneliness stems from his work with clinical clients. Rogers views loneliness as a manifestation of poor adjustment. For him, the cause of loneliness lies within the individual, in a phenomenological discrepancy in one's self-concept. Rogers differs from psychodynamic theorists in that he does not give much credence to childhood influences. Instead, current forces produce the experience.

The Existential Approach

Existentialists take as their starting point the "fact" that humans are ultimately alone. No one else can experience our thoughts and feelings; separateness is an essential condition of our existence. Those who accept this view often focus on the question of how people can live with their loneliness.

The leading spokesperson for this perspective has been Moustakas (1961, 1972), author of several popular books (see also Von Witzleben, 1958). Moustakas emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between loneliness anxiety and true loneliness. Loneliness anxiety is a system of defense mechanisms that distracts people from dealing with crucial life questions and that motivates them constantly to seek activity with others. True loneliness stems from the reality of being alone and of facing life's ultimate experiences (i.e., birth, death, change, tragedy) alone. From Moustakas' viewpoint, true loneliness can be a creative force:

> Every real experience of loneliness involves a confrontation or an encounter with oneself . . . The encounter . . . is a joyous experience . . . Both the encounter and the confrontation are ways of advancing life and coming alive in a relatively stagnant world; they are ways of breaking out of uniform cycles of behavior. (Moustakas, 1972, pp. 20–21)

Existentialists thus encourage people to overcome their fear of loneliness and learn to use loneliness positively.

Like the other theorists presented so far, Moustakas works with clinical clients. Other proponents of this position have of course derived their views largely from philosophical considerations. Unlike most theorists, Moustakas has a positive view of loneliness. Although he does not deny that it can be painful, he sees it as a productive, creative condition. Existentialists do not seek the causal roots of loneliness in the usual sense. They are not especially interested in the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of loneliness; for them it is a given in human existence.

Sociological Explanations

Bowman (1955), Riesman (see Riesman, Glazer, & Denney, 1961), and Slater (1976) are representatives of the sociological approach to loneliness. In a short article, Bowman hypothesized three social forces leading to increased loneliness in contemporary society: (1) a decline in primary group relations; (2) an increase in family mobility; and (3) an increase in social mobility. Reisman and Slater have each linked their analysis of loneliness to the study of the American character and how society fails to meet its members' needs.

Riesman and his associates claimed that Americans have become "other-directed." Not only do other-directed individuals want to be liked, they also conform and continually monitor their interpersonal environment to determine how they should behave. Other-directed people are cut off from their inner selves, their feelings, and their aspirations. (Here, of course, Riesman's

analysis complements Rogers'.) These traits are shaped by parents, teachers, and the mass media. The result, for an other-directed person, is a diffuse anxiety and an overconcern with peer popularity that is never really satisfied. As implied in the title of Riesman's book, the members of our other-directed society form "the lonely crowd."

For Slater (1976), America's problem is not other-direction but rather individualism. Slater believes we all have a desire for community, engagement, and dependence. We want to trust and cooperate with others, "to show responsibility for the control of one's impulses and the directions of one's life" (p. 9). However, these basic needs for community, engagement, and dependence are thwarted in American society because of a commitment to individualism, the belief that everyone should pursue his or her own destiny. The result is loneliness. Slater (1976, p. 34) argues:

> Individualism is rooted in the attempt to deny the reality of human interdependence. One of the major goals of technology in America is to "free" us from the necessity of relating to, submitting to, depending upon, or controlling other people. Unfortunately, the more we have succeeded in doing this, the more we have felt disconnected, bored, [and] lonely.

Rather than classifying loneliness as a normal or abnormal behavior, it can be said that Riesman and Slater see loneliness as normative—a statistically common attribute of the population. While they discuss loneliness as a part of the American character, they explain this modal personality quality as the product of social forces. Thus for these sociologists the cause of loneliness is essentially outside the individual. In terms of time, these theories emphasize socialization (a historical type cause), but many of the forces (i.e., mass media effects) that contribute to socialization are in continuous, current operation. And of course Bowman, like many other sociologists, stresses events that happen in adulthood, such as divorce. In formulating their views, Reisman and Slater have relied on literature, social indicators, and the mass media as sources of their speculations.

The Interactionist View

Weiss (1973) is the leading spokesperson for the interactionist approach. His explanation of loneliness can be classified as interactionist for two reasons. First, he emphasizes that loneliness is not solely a function of personality factors, nor of situational factors. Instead loneliness is the product of their combined (or interactive) effect. (In this regard, Weiss's view is similar to Sermat's, 1975.) Second, Weiss (1973) has written on the provisions of social relationships—such things as attachment, guidance, and a sense of worth. Implicit in such an analysis is the view that loneliness results when one's social interactions are deficient in supplying crucial social requirements.

As noted elsewhere in this volume, Weiss postulated two types of loneliness, which he believes have different antecedents and different affective

responses. Emotional loneliness results from the absence of a close, intimate attachment such as a lover or a spouse. An emotionally lonely person should feel something akin to the separation anxiety of a child: anxiety, restlessness, and emptiness. Social loneliness is a response to the absence of meaningful friendships or a sense of a community. A socially lonely person experiences boredom and feelings of being socially marginal.

Weiss has run seminars for the widowed and recently separated (see Chapter 21). Presumably, out of his efforts to help participants in these seminars, he has derived many of his insights. He is concerned with "ordinary" loneliness, a condition experienced by many if not most people during their lives. Thus he sees loneliness as a normal reaction. Obviously he considers both internal (characterological) and external (situational) causes of loneliness. However, he is clear that "of the two approaches, the situational would seem to have the greater attraction at this point" (Weiss, 1973, pp. 73–74). This being the case, he is emphasizing current conditions as the key factors in producing loneliness. With regard to causes, it is interesting to note that Weiss (see Chapter 5) entertains the possibility that even instinct plays a part in loneliness.

The Cognitive Approach

Peplau and her colleagues (see Chapter 9) have been leading advocates of a cognitive approach to loneliness. The most salient aspect of this approach is its emphasis on cognition as a mediating factor between deficits in sociability and the experience of loneliness. In articulating the role played by cognition, Peplau draws on attribution theory. She discusses, for example, how the perceived causes of one's loneliness can influence the intensity of the experience and the perceived likelihood of the loneliness persisting over time.

As indicated in Chapter 1, cognitive approaches propose that loneliness occurs when the individual perceives a discrepancy between two factors, the person's desired and achieved levels of social contact. In this regard, Peplau's view is akin to Sermat's (1978). This theme has been helpful in organizing the literature on loneliness and explaining findings that would otherwise be paradoxical (Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Like Weiss, Peplau has been concerned with loneliness among "normal" populations. Empirical evidence from surveys and experiments has played an important role in Peplau's conceptual formulations. In her search for the causes of loneliness, Peplau has cast a broad net: she has examined both characterological and situational factors as well as both historical and current influences. Cognitive factors, the unique aspect of her theorizing, are processes within the individual operating in a contemporaneous manner.

A Privacy Approach

In Chapter 10, Derlega and Margulis use privacy and self-disclosure concepts as a way of understanding loneliness. Derlega and Margulis assume, somewhat

akin to Weiss, that social relationships help the individual achieve various goals. Loneliness is caused by the absence of an appropriate social partner who could assist in achieving these goals. Loneliness is apt to occur when one's interpersonal relationships lack the privacy needed for honest communication.

Underlying the privacy approach is an assumption that the individual seeks to maintain an equilibrium between desired and achieved levels of social contact. Derlega and Margulis discuss how one's social networks, expectations, and personality can influence this balance.

The main source of Derlega and Margulis' ideas is previous theory rather than either clinical work or research. Implicitly they discuss loneliness as a normal experience encountered by a broad cross-section of society. Their attention to the continuous process of balancing desired and achieved levels of contact places emphasis on the contemporary determinants of loneliness. However, their analysis leaves room for the impact of past influences. They consider factors within both the individual and environmental as leading to loneliness.

General Systems Theory

Flanders, in Chapter 11 of this volume, articulates a general systems approach to loneliness. The basic assumption of this theory is that the behavior of living organisms reflects the intermeshed influence of several levels operating simultaneously as a system. The levels range from the cellular to the international. In this view loneliness is a feedback mechanism for helping the individual or society maintain a steady, optimal level of human contact.

Flanders' speculations on loneliness do not stem from an empirical source; instead they reflect an extension of Miller's systems theory. Flanders sees loneliness as potentially painful, but believes it is also a useful feedback mechanism that can contribute to the individual's or the society's well-being. Systems theory subsumes both individual and situational causes of behavior. The time span needed for certain variables to have their impact may be fairly long. Yet systems theory is essentially a model in which the causes of behavior are assigned to ongoing systems dynamics.

A Comparative Summary

Table 8.1 presents a summary of our comparisons among the eight theories. The majority of the theoretical speculation on loneliness has been tied to clinical work or stemmed from existing theory. Most commentators see loneliness as an aversive, unpleasant experience; yet only a minority of observers discuss loneliness as a pathological response. For most, it is a phenomenon experienced by a broad cross-section of the population. Only advocates of the psychodynamic tradition exclusively stress the childhood antecedents of loneliness. Most theoretical analyses emphasize the role of current factors in causing loneliness.

Table 8.1. Eight Approaches to Loneliness: A Comparative Summary [a]

	Psycho-dynamic	*Phenome-nological*	*Existential*	*Socio-logical*	*Interac-tionist*	*Cognitive*	*Privacy*	*Systems*
Views tied to	Clinical work	Clinical work	Clinical work	Social analysis	Clinical work	Research	Theory	Theory
Nature of loneliness								
Positive	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Normal or pathological	Patho-logical	Patho-logical	Universal	Normative	Normal	Normal	Normal	Normal
Causes								
Within the person or the situation	Person	Person	Human condition	Society	Both	Both	Both	Both
Historical and childhood vs. current	Child-hood	Current	Perpetual	Both	Current	Current	Current	Current

[a] As a summary of trends and emphases, this table reflects judgments made by the present authors as well as a simplification of nuances and details.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Several criteria are commonly used for evaluating theories. These include parsimony, internal logical consistency, empirical support, breadth, and the like. At the present time, two criteria seem especially important to us, and two others warrant comment. Our two key criteria are completeness and stimulation of research. The other two are empirical support and practical usefulness.

Obviously the criteria one uses to evaluate theories influence the relative standing of different approaches. As social psychologists, we are perhaps more concerned than clinicians or philosophers with empirical research. We have also participated in the efforts to offer an adequate conceptualization of loneliness. Thus, in deciding how to evaluate theories, there may be a tendency on our part to select criteria favorable to our own perspective.

Completeness

As noted earlier, most perspectives on loneliness are little more than short articles or fragmentary observations. Riesman and Slater used the concept in the titles of their books; yet for them, loneliness is an implied aspect of American society rather than the focal point of their analysis. The chapters in this book by Derlega and Margulis and by Flanders show the usefulness of privacy and systems concepts. Yet these chapters represent initial efforts rather than fully developed analyses. Moustakas has written at length in popular books. But his concerns have been more with justifying and explaining the concept than systematically developing theoretical propositions.

In our opinion, the most developed treatment of loneliness are offered by psychodynamic theorists, Weiss and cognitive theorists. A number of psychodynamically oriented psychologists have written on loneliness, and this by itself has contributed to the more elaborate nature of their views. Weiss' 1973 volume is primarily at what we called Stage 2 conceptual development. He explores the concept of loneliness and its varieties. But he also discusses the causes of loneliness. Cognitive theorists such as Peplau and her associates have published extensively on loneliness; some of their writing achieves Stage 3 conceptualizing. In other words, they identify constructs and articulate the relationships among these factors.

Research Stimulation and Support

None of the conceptual viewpoints has stimulated a great deal of research. Obviously it is premature to evaluate the privacy and systems approaches on this criterion. The existential view maintains that loneliness is a fact of the human condition. It is not a predictive model in the usual sense, and as such, is unlikely to serve as the basis for much research.

Although research could be done to support their views, neither Riesman nor Slater have devoted their primary energies to empirical work. Demographic and sociological variables have been included in numerous research studies, but this has been done in an ad hoc basis. It is a source of mild embarrassment (but not a devastating blow) to sociologists that Rubenstein and Shaver (1980) failed to find a relationship between social mobility and loneliness.

Several theories have stimulated a modest amount of research. Weiss's notions of two kinds of loneliness and his provisions have been used in research by Rubenstein and Shaver (Chapter 13) and by Cutrona (Chapter 18). Rogers' position has stimulated several dissertation projects (see Eddy, 1961; Moore, 1976; Sisenwein, 1964) including work to show that a discrepancy between one's real and ideal self is associated with loneliness. Some evidence bearing on the psychodynamic viewpoint has emerged. For instance, Moore (1972) tested the predicted relationship between hostility and loneliness. But despite the longer history of the psychodynamic viewpoint, it has not led directly to programmatic efforts. While the body of evidence testing the interactionist, psychodynamic, and phenomenological viewpoints is small, the results have generally been consistent with theoretical expectations.

The cognitive approach stands out in terms of generating research. It has served as the basis for the number of studies (see Chapters 9 and 18). These have been of a programmatic nature and have demonstrated the important influence that attributions, perceived control, and the like have on loneliness.

Practical Usefulness

Theories of loneliness have had relatively little direct payoff for the treatment of loneliness (see Chapter 21). In seeing loneliness as inevitable or positive, existentialists and systems theorists are less concerned with alleviating it. Sociologists have not been concerned with the treatment of individual clients, although their views do have implications for the formulation of social policies. Similarly, Peplau's theorizing and research has implications for treatment, but this has not been the UCLA group's primary concern.

Several views of loneliness have been formulated by clinical practitioners. Naturally, these writers have their generally preferred approaches to therapy. Rogers has *not* spelled out how client-centered therapy should be specially applied to the problem of loneliness. Weiss has developed seminars for the separated, but the focus of these groups is only partially on loneliness. Psychodynamically oriented psychologists (see Chapter 21) have perhaps done the most to address the issue of how to treat loneliness.

With regard to treatment, we should call attention to Young's work (see Chapter 22). He draws on reinforcement theory and Beck's cognitive behavior therapy model. We have not treated Young's writing as a conceptual perspective because theory development was not Young's primary goal. However,

his analysis contains the seeds of an important reinforcement analysis of loneliness, and in the present context, we would note he has developed a carefully articulated, theoretically grounded approach to treating lonely clients.

An Evaluative Summary

Using an absolute standard, one can identify faults in all the existing explanations of loneliness. Indeed these so-called "theories" aren't really theories in the most sophisticated sense of the term. Yet given the field's youthful stage of development, we would not be too critical. The existing speculations have without question justified the importance of the construct and helped to illuminate the phenomenon. Thus they have accomplished the goals of Stage 1 and 2 conceptualization.

Existing viewpoints have not yet stimulated a large, programmatic body of research nor resulted in a "cure" for loneliness, yet they have made contributions toward both. Certainly we are today in a better position to help alleviate loneliness than we were 50 years ago when Zilboorg wrote his first article.

In most cases existing formulations can be further elaborated and their potential more fully realized in the years ahead. As fairly recent statements, which reflect current trends in psychological thinking, we anticipate that the interactionist and cognitive models (or variations thereon) are apt to play a seminal role in guiding loneliness research in the early 1980s. We think reinforcement ideas could also play a more important role. Whatever perspectives become dominant, we hope this decade will see a shift from Stage 2 to Stage 3 conceptualizations: from exploring the nature of loneliness per se to developing more systematic sets of propositions about its relationships with other variables.

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