

Theoretical Approach to Loneliness: A Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract

The events of COVID-19 have brought a new light to the already pressing issue of growing loneliness. This review revisits the theoretical underpinnings of loneliness from the past 60 years and attempts to review and critiques the cognitive theory of loneliness. The paper focuses on defining loneliness and its related constructs. Second, we review the theoretical foundations of loneliness ranging from the earliest psychoanalyst perspective to the evolutionary theory of loneliness. Third, particular emphasis is placed on the cognitive perspective and its merits and shortcomings, with an overview of different cognitive models of loneliness. The discussion and comprehension of the theoretical foundations of loneliness provide valuable insights for interpreting its occurrence and a fresh perspective on various debates in loneliness research.

Keywords: Loneliness, Social Isolation, Emotional Loneliness, Social Loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness has been a much-researched area in western societies. Classic theories of psychology have used loneliness and its related concepts. The most widely used definition of loneliness states that loneliness is an "unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively" (Peplau & Perlman, 1981, p.31). Many uni- dimensional theorists have offered various explanations about loneliness, but they all seem to share three vital points with this definition. First, loneliness occurs when there is a gap between an individual's actual and desired levels of social relations. This includes a discrepancy in the number of the relationship and the level of intimacy desired. Secondly, loneliness is a subjective phenomenon, not social isolation. Third, the experience of loneliness is aversive. Although loneliness may spur personal growth, the experience is unpleasant, adverse, and distressing. Although many theorists seem to agree with this definition, some critics find this definition based only on the intensity of loneliness experienced.

Over time various perspectives on loneliness have provided a theoretical explanation. For this review, we will focus on the cognitive theory of loneliness. The earliest explanation of loneliness was from a psychodynamic perspective. The cognitive approach to loneliness emphasizes the role of individuals' perceptions (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Sullivan, 1953). They explained loneliness because of failure to form

close relations with early caretakers. Their emphasis on attachment processes and the need for intimacy influenced subsequent conceptualizations of loneliness in the broader population. However, these psychodynamic perspectives were based primarily on observations of patients in clinical contexts. Therefore the generalizability of these theories was limited.

The second perspective that gained popularity was the existential perspective of loneliness (Moustakas, 1961). The existential perspective contrasts several types of loneliness (Moustakas, 1961). Existential loneliness is linked to initial loneliness, a part of the human experience. Existential loneliness is the result of negative and painful experiences, as well as overcoming the "long period of desolation." According to Moustakas, in existential loneliness, a person is aware of Isolation and alone. The second type of loneliness stems from human anxiousness and disconnection from emotions.

Social needs and cognitive perspective dominated the second half of the 20th century. Robert S. Weiss wrote about the social needs approach to loneliness (1973). This concept, which was informed by Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, asserts that loneliness emerges when a person's fundamental need for social connection is thwarted. Weiss (1974) suggested six more elements of social relationships: attachment, social integration, guidance, confirmation of worth, reliable alliance, attachment, and opportunity to provide nurturance. Loneliness results from deficits in any of these provisions. Weiss also distinguished between two varieties of loneliness, each characterized by deficiencies in distinct social interactions. The first, social loneliness, is characterized by a lack of integration, such as with friends. The second type, emotional loneliness, refers to the lack of an emotionally-supportive close relationship. The direct relationship between loneliness and the actual presence or absence of specific social facilities is one of the drawbacks of the social needs approach. It does not consider that individuals may desire various social ties or that two persons may respond differently to the same social inadequacies.

The cognitive approach to loneliness emphasizes the role of individuals' perceptions and attributions in mediating the association between social relationships and loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1981; Perlman & Peplau, 1982). Whereas the social needs approach conceptualizes social relationships to fulfill intrinsic emotional needs, the cognitive approach concerns how individuals appraise their social relationships. Specifically, it proposes that loneliness arises when individuals perceive a mismatch between their desired and actual degree of social connection. Individuals vary in their ideal quality and quantity of social contact. A discrepancy can occur when social relationships are insufficient to meet this level or, conversely, when they exceed it.

According to the Evolutionary model of loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2006), membership in a close-knit social group facilitates collaboration, protection, and resource sharing, all of which benefit children's healthy development. Therefore, alienation from the social group harms the capacity of people to propagate their genetic material. A person who finds social Isolation unpleasant would be more motivated to achieve social integration, maximizing their contribution to the gene pool. Constant vigilance for social threats causes cognitive bias in lonely persons, who see the world as more dangerous than non-lonely individuals. Lonely individuals produce a self-fulfilling prophecy and a self-reinforcing loop of feeling lonely and avoiding social connection due to poor experiences and unfavorable expectations of social interaction (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). Thus, although Weiss characterized loneliness as devoid of redeeming qualities, Cacioppo and colleagues suggest that sensitivity to loneliness encourages

adaptive action by driving the individual to re-establish shattered social relationships (Cacioppo et al., 2014).

Table 1: Major theories of loneliness

Major Authors	Theories of Loneliness
Fromm-Reichmann (1959); Sullivan (1953)	Psychodynamic Perspective
Moustakas (1961)	Existential Perspective
Bowlby (1969); Weiss (1973)	Social Needs Perspective
Peplau and Perlman (1981)	Cognitive Perspective
Cacioppo et al. (2006)	Evolutionary Perspective

Cognitive Models of Loneliness

The first cognitive model of loneliness is the cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness by Peplau and Perlman (1981), which highlights the difference between the actual and desired levels of expected social involvement. This discrepancy shows that the amount of social involvement is insufficient, but rather dissatisfaction with the amount that causes this distress. The cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness is an extension of earlier theoretical ideas showing that satisfaction and attraction in relationships are based on an individual's internal comparison level. According to this model, individuals judge their interpersonal relationships against internal standards or expectations. When this standard is met or exceeded, social satisfaction is achieved.

The model consists of distal predictors of loneliness. They differentiate between the factors that render an individual vulnerable to loneliness (predisposing factors) and factors that can start the onset of loneliness (precipitating factors). Personality factors such as being extremely shy may lead to a lack of social skills, leading to poor social relationships. This lack of social provisions may prove detrimental and lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Another predisposing factor is culture. The values and attitudes shared by a group are significant factors influencing an individual's behavior. The shared belief may, in turn, lead to the development of high levels of loneliness; for example - Americans are highly individualistic; however, Japanese culture promotes collectivism. The difference in the behavior of young adults between these groups may vary according to what their respective society expects from their emerging adults. Americans are highly encouraged to move away from their home and may not develop a feeling of loneliness, but similar circumstances may predispose Japanese individuals towards loneliness.

The second influencing factor is an individual's environment. The situations vary according to multiple factors. For example, students from humanities may have fewer classes to attend than medical students and, therefore, may have more opportunities for developing social relations. Similarly, students who move away from their homes may experience a breakdown of older relations leading to the excessive strain of developing new relationships. The third factor is the cognitive processes, such as social comparison and causal attribution. The individual difference in perception of loneliness also changes whether people consider their situation worse than that of their counterparts. Similarly, few individuals attribute their loneliness to personal inadequacies.

The second cognitive model of loneliness was based on a large-scale qualitative study in Canada: Rokach's Tri-level Model of loneliness (1988). Based on a large-scale content analysis of 526 Canadian subjects, Rokach proposed a three-level model of loneliness. The model categorizes ten factors of loneliness, highlighting four key components: self-alienation, interpersonal Isolation, agony, and distressed reaction. According to Rokach (1988), none of the factors can determine loneliness on its own,

and examining various conditions is imperative to understand the experience of loneliness. The first component is self-alienation, which is the feeling of Isolation from one's core and identity, resulting in emptiness and depersonalization. The second component is Interpersonal Isolation which refers to the lack of quality in social relationships. This includes the absence of meaningful relationships – missing a close relationship or yearning for an intimacy lost or never experienced and perceived social alienation or the experience of being disconnected or rejected from a meaningful social group and abandonment or feeling of being left behind or betrayed by others in the social group. The third component of loneliness encompasses the negative feeling of pain and hurt- agony. This category focuses on Inner Turmoil, such as confusion and numbness, and Emotional Upheaval caused by confusion in loneliness. The last component is the distressed reaction or the acute maladjustment in social, cognitive, and behavioral functioning experienced by the lonely individual.

Table 2: Cognitive models of loneliness

Authors	Cognitive Models of Loneliness
Peplau and Perlman (1981)	Cognitive Discrepancy Model
Rokach (1988)	Tri-level model of loneliness
Cacioppo and Hawley (2009)	Regulatory loop
Qualter et al. (2015)	Re-affiliation model
Spithoven et al. (2017)	Cognitive aspects of loneliness model

The regulatory loop, a theoretical model proposed by Cacioppo and Hawley (2009), highlighted lonely individuals' cognitive, behavioural, and affective features. They explained that loneliness causes individuals to become hyper-vigilant toward social threats. Such hyper-vigilance is a result of feeling lonely. Consequently, people who feel lonely may also tend to pay attention and have a memory of more negative social events. Moreover, those biases may escalate the probability of the person holding negative expectations during social interaction and formulating a more pessimistic social world. These cognitions may negatively trigger individuals to alter their behavior in social situations, such that they produce more negative social interactions, confirming that they are socially inept and produce more undesirable social interactions. These cognitive and behavioral maladaptive features may increase the activation of stress responses, which leads to other malfunctions, including heightened cognitive load, diminished sleep quality, and adverse health impacts such as increased morbidity and mortality (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010).

The Re-affiliation model (Qualter et al., 2015) is an extension of the regulatory loop. It highlights the negative feeling of loneliness as an early trigger response in the form of withdrawal from social situations. Simultaneously, individuals also tend to become hyper-vigilant towards social information, as their cognitive re-affiliation process is triggered by loneliness. Additionally, the process of cognitive re-affiliation can have two implications. It can either lead to a successful reconnection with the social cues by causing individuals to regulate their behavior, or it can escalate withdrawal behavior and make an individual over-sensitive towards social cues. Hence, this model accentuated the evolutionary purpose of loneliness and suggested a dual path of the consequence of feeling lonely.

The cognitive aspects of the loneliness model (Spithoven et al., 2017) is based on the Social-Information Processing model, which suggests that social cognitions of socially adjusted and socially maladjusted children differ. The cognitive aspects of the loneliness model state that loneliness is associated with a cognitive bias and that lonely individuals' cognitions differ from those of non-lonely individuals in all aspects of

information processing (Spithoven et al., 2017). More specifically, lonely individuals are hyper-vigilant/ have increased attention to socially threatening stimuli. Moreover, these individuals hold negative and hostile intent attributions, expect rejection, evaluate themselves and others negatively, endorse less approach- and more avoidance-oriented goals, and have low self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

Loneliness is a vital sign of strained belongingness which motivates the individual to continue and renew social interaction. Current cognitive theories of loneliness propose that individuals have a mismatch between their desired and actual social relationships. Furthermore, emotion is subjective. Contemporary models of loneliness have focused on the feedback loop in which individuals are trapped in unpleasant emotions and are hyper-vigilant towards negative information, resulting in detrimental health outcomes. Another cognitive model views loneliness as a prejudiced method for interpreting social input. More research is required to understand the process of lonely people, as demonstrated by the present review of loneliness, which has several facets.

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