

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness

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Abstract

Much has been said and written on loneliness, which is a common human phenomenon that belongs to everyday existence, but few attempts have been made to capture the phenomenon and its existential meaning without reducing its complexity. This paper addresses the question: What is loneliness, what is its essence? The study practiced a phenomenological approach, called Reflective Lifeworld Research. Twenty-six interviews were analysed for meaning with the aim of describing an essential structure for the phenomenon, showing what loneliness is. The analysis shows that the phenomenon of loneliness stands out in meaning as “figure” against a “background” of fellowship, connectedness and context. One is lonely when important others are not there, because either one has rejected them or they have chosen to be rejected and left the person behind, feeling lonely. One can reject others in favour of another kind of connectedness. Such loneliness is restful and pleasant. It involves the lack of tangible context that other present people can offer, yet a context is not missing—in this instance there is a relationship to and one is part of something else such as nature or animal fellowship. Involuntary loneliness on the other hand involves a lack of context and connectedness. To be involuntarily lonely and not belonging to anyone is to lack participation in the world. To not be. Loneliness as a phenomenon is further characterized as transcending the present situation containing loneliness. One can feel lonely even if there are many people around, or one can be completely alone without feeling lonely. Loneliness can disappear with a sense of belonging, when one connects with someone who is miles away.

Key words: *loneliness, phenomenology, lifeworld, Reflective Lifeworld Research*

Loneliness is a phenomenon that belongs to life, to existence, and is something we all recognize; everyone has felt lonely at some point. The experiences, however, are very varied, and loneliness can be described in many ways. Even to one person, loneliness can be experienced differently at different times and in different circumstances.

Much has been said and written on loneliness, but few attempts have been made to capture the phenomenon and its existential meaning without reducing its complexity. An important question is, what is loneliness, what is its essence? Loneliness is of interest in human sciences, not least the caring sciences. An important question here is, how is loneliness related to health and well-being?

The research context and aim

There is a lot of existing research on loneliness, in particular in the context of the elderly. Loneliness is

related to depression and mortality (cf. Stek, Vinckers, Gussekloo, Beekman, van der Mast & Westendorp, 2005), to vision impairment (Verstraten, Brinkmann, Stevens, & Schouten, 2005), and to social networks (cf. Cattán & Ingold, 2003; Ekwall, Sivberg & Hallberg, 2005). Murphy (2006) relates loneliness in older people to social isolation, depression, and physical health. She concludes her analysis by emphasizing that loneliness is an important indicator of well-being in older people and suggests that those who care for older people should recognise signs and symptoms of loneliness, as well as appropriate interventions. “Aching solitude” showed to be a core finding in Pilkington’s (2005) phenomenological analysis of grieving a loss in elders.

Research on loneliness in young people has been conducted in relation to homelessness (cf. Rew, 2000), and there is research with a range of contexts, for example focussing on female adolescents with a feminist perspective (Davidson, 1995).

The phenomenon is also illuminated in a more general way by Lindholm, Granström and Lindström (2001) who found that loneliness could be experienced as pleasure as well as suffering. Loneliness is connected with humiliation and shame and something that young people fight against, but they also experience the pleasurable loneliness as something important in their lives. However, the research stops with this dualistic understanding, that loneliness is either positive *or* negative, and the essential structure that connects these aspects of loneliness are not illuminated. A more complex picture is painted by Kirova (2000, 2004) in her analyses of children's lived experiences of loneliness, but she does not seem to be interested in finding a more general structure of the phenomenon's meanings.

The literature review also gives the picture of a general interest in old people's loneliness, as well as the young, not least adolescent experience of loneliness. Research on loneliness in adults has been conducted, for example, in the area of caring and nursing, but these studies include various contexts of illness.

Summing up the literature review of empirical research on loneliness, we have a broad range of publications on loneliness, mostly related to other existential aspects and feelings. Much of the research is quantitative and a great deal focuses upon the negative aspects of loneliness. If the positive aspects of loneliness are focussed upon at all, part of the results is characterized by the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" loneliness.

The view of loneliness that one gets from a review of empirical research is confirmed by a look in literature with a philosophical or other theoretical perspective on loneliness. Karnick (2005, p. 11) states that the lived experience of feeling lonely is "not adequately addressed" in the existent literature in healthcare fields, and that loneliness has been regarded as a "social deficit problem", not least within psychology which, in general, has understood loneliness as something unpleasant and distressing, and related to psychopathology. She further states that loneliness is discussed in a reductionistic way, e.g. in terms of linear cause-effect relationships, in psychology and nursing literature. Only in phenomenological existential philosophy did Karnick find loneliness described as an important and yet ambiguous phenomenon, part of the human condition for well-being.

The present study, its approach and method

Loneliness as a general human phenomenon became the point of departure for this phenomenological

study, as a phenomenon belonging to our everyday existence. The study explored the variations of lived experiences of loneliness with the aim to illuminate an essential, and thus general, structure of meanings of the phenomenon, the lived experience of loneliness. With such an approach to loneliness, the idea was to illuminate abstract and general meanings as well as concrete lived variations and nuances of the phenomenon, and by that make possible new understanding of the relationship between loneliness and health as well-being.

The present study is an example of reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001; Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström, 2007; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003, 2004; Dahlberg, 2006). The approach is mainly based in the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and it emphasizes an open and "bridled" attitude towards the phenomenon of study and the process of understanding.

A broad range of informants was invited to be interviewed about, and describe their experience of loneliness. All together around 100 interviews were carried out. The analysis concentrated upon 26 of the interviews with both female and male informants between 12 and 82 years of age. The selected interviews were the ones of high quality. There is a slight overweight for female informants as well as those that are middle-aged. When the analysis was done, showing a general structure of the phenomenon in question, the result was related to the interviews that were not included in the initial analysis. It was found that there were no meanings in the remaining interviews that were not included in the essential structure. In addition, in this final reading of the interviews nothing was found that was contradictive to the present result.

Inspired by an idea of dialogal research (Halling & Leifer, 1991; Halling, Leifer & Rowe, 2006), the design meant that each informant was interviewed by a student conducting the interview as a course assignment within a research education course with the aim of teaching phenomenological research, where I was the main teacher. The fact that there were as many interviewers as informants, who all had participated in the same research interviewing training, contributed to a collection of interviews that were of the same kind of format, but extraordinary rich of meanings due to the many variations of descriptions of the same phenomenon.

The interviews were carried out from questions about the lived experience of loneliness. The informants were encouraged by questions and probes such as, tell me about a time when you felt lonely. How was that experience to you? How did you feel? The informants were further encouraged to be

concrete and detailed about the experiences, and to “tell more”.

The students analysed their interviews in groups as part of the course assignment. After the course, I got the permission to use the interviews in the analysis, after informed consent by the informants. This article is a result of my own independent analysis.

The transcribed interviews were analysed for meaning, with the aim to describe a general structure of meanings that constitute and characterise the phenomenon loneliness. The analysis was carried through by way of an open, “bridled” and yet interrogative work with all the various descriptions. The work, which is characterized both as an analysis and a synthesis, can be seen as a dynamic approach to data in which one meaning temporarily is understood as a figure against the rest of the material as background. The next moment another meaning is figure, and the meaning that recently was a figure is now part of the background. By such work, a structure of meaning can be described (Dahlberg, 2006).

An ambition has been to show the essence as well as the many nuances of the meaning of loneliness. The very essence of the phenomenon is well described, for example in philosophy, but the lived experience has been more present in fiction writing than in scientific contexts. Further, other research (including other approaches to phenomenological research) is often lacking a presentation of a general structure of the phenomenon and ends by presenting various categories of experiences. One aim of this paper is thus to relate the general meaning to the particular, and present a structure of meaning regarding the phenomenon of loneliness.

In the result section below, the description of the essence of the phenomenon, with its most invariant meanings, is first presented. These essential and invariant meanings characterise the phenomenon in general, and without these meanings it would not be this, but another, phenomenon. After the first piece of text describing the essentials come the various meanings that further constitute the phenomenon, and is part of the general structure. However, in these descriptions the more contextual variations are presented, as well as the individual experiences, illuminated by excerpts from the interviews. I have chosen to present many quotes from the interviews, which show the width, depth and the many faces of the phenomenon. Some variations are not characteristic for the phenomenon of loneliness, but can very well be part of another phenomenon as well. At the same time they are important for understanding the width of the experiences of loneliness, i.e. they describe how loneliness can be to some people, and in that way, they belong to the structure of loneliness. Throughout the result presentation,

the interviewer’s utterances in the interview excerpts are presented in parentheses.

Results

The phenomenon of loneliness stands out in meaning as “figure” against a “background” of fellowship with “important” people. In order to understand loneliness and its meanings, we must first consider this “background of fellowship” and its relation to loneliness.

Fellowship with other people, to belong, appears in the interview material as fundamental to existence. One can “be together with” other people, without them being particularly important in one’s life, but one only feels a sense of belonging with people who are close, i.e. those that are important in one’s life. The absence of these particularly important people signifies the phenomenon of loneliness. One is lonely when these “important others” are not there, because one has either rejected them or they have “chosen to be rejected” and left the person behind, feeling lonely.

Loneliness in its essential meaning is also related to context and connection. Involuntary loneliness involves a lack of context. To be left alone, without others and their fellowship, means a reduced feeling of context and connection. To be involuntarily lonely and not belonging to anyone or anything is to lack participation in the world. Even voluntary and restful loneliness involves the lack of tangible context that other present people can offer, yet a context is not missing—in this instance there is a connection to and one is part of “something else”, e.g. nature, or animal fellowship.

Loneliness as a phenomenon is characterized as transcending the immediate situation containing loneliness. One can feel lonely even if there are many people around, or one can be completely alone without feeling lonely. Loneliness can disappear with a sense of belonging, when one connects with someone who is miles away.

The meaning of loneliness can be further understood by its constituents described below. First the hard loneliness where others are not there, or when others around but not acknowledging you, is described: “Loneliness is to be without the others” and “Loneliness with others”. Loneliness has a potential of strength, which cannot be used because of its general meaning of being negative: “Loneliness is strange, wrong, ugly or even shameful”. When the power of loneliness is given room and loneliness is something voluntary another meaning makes a gestalt: “Loneliness is restful and creative”. Last, there is also an outer horizon to loneliness, which as well as the other core meanings constitute the

phenomenon: “Companionship that constitutes the outer horizon of loneliness”.

Loneliness is to be without the others

Loneliness is to be rejected, excluded, forgotten, abandoned, unwanted or unnecessary. The meaning of loneliness as being rejected by people that one wants a relationship with, or “not chosen”, as one informant expressed it, is a strong “common theme” in the current interview material. This loneliness hurts and it is inflicted. One does not control this loneliness, but one becomes lonely; “it is something that happens”. One can feel lonely if “others in general” are not present, but it is this slightly stronger, deeper feeling of loneliness that appears when those “important” people are not, and do not want to be, where you are. To be lonely when one desires companionship leads to feelings of being excluded, barred, forgotten or that one is not needed. One then feels “terribly lonely. The loneliest in the world, I believe”.

This loneliness means feeling excluded, unwanted, not counted or not good enough. It is clear that the feeling is affected by the “important others” that one is not welcome to be with. This makes it more difficult for the lonely person, rejected, abandoned to have to ask to be included, because “one is at a disadvantage” when one so eagerly wants to take part, and the more important these others are, the harder it is. The fact that loneliness is so encroaching is particularly difficult:

You know, for me it isn't, isn't chosen, but something you're forced into. You know, to feel lonely you say that, er, it's just that it doesn't feel like you have anyone, you miss someone, a person, er ... but then it's up to each and everyone, you know, what you mean by it and so, but for me it signifies this, this feeling of ... of missing companionship or ... er ... you know more like life ... (mm) for life somehow (mm) so, so for me it has a negative meaning.

The sense of loneliness can be strong and deep, and has the power to move the individual's entire existence. Loneliness can be felt when one is not seen, not heard, when no one cares. In this type of loneliness, one feels abandoned. It involves having lost something; an “emptiness” arises and “time stops”. It is “some form of not feeling at home” that “feels difficult, feels uncomfortable”. To be inflicted with loneliness is to be lost in the world, or to not really be anywhere:

... you perhaps look for ... attention and company but don't succeed, and then you all of a sudden have a loneliness about you that might be infinite where you're neither noticed, heard nor seen. // You can feel sorrow ... you feel sort of abandoned and forgotten. // That you suddenly end up in a sort of vacuum where you neither go up nor down sort of, you're stuck in the middle somewhere.

One is in a vacuum, has no place and simply does not exist:

If anyone sees you, you're not lonely. // If someone cares about me, I'm seen. Then I'm not lonely. If someone talks to you. // No one noticed that I existed. I was like a ... I wasn't there.

There is a pain created inside by the loneliness that appears when one is not seen or heard, when no one cares or thinks about you, when no one understands, “no one that ... notices you at all ...”. The loneliness in which one is excluded from companionship implies a lost connection. This meaning of loneliness can be understood as an existential deficit, i.e. that something vital is missing.

The relationship between loneliness and companionship is apparent in situations when one has discovered a particularly intensive companionship and then, for some reason, loses it. One particularly difficult feeling of loneliness can develop when one has been let down by someone who is close, e.g. someone that is family. A man who had been let down by people he thought were very close to him and would always be there, explains:

Hmm [silence] yes but that is exactly what signifies loneliness. To me that ... that you don't have people around you, the way you would want. Er, that you, you miss someone to ... to really trust, to really know ... (mm) that these are people who'll be there for you come rain come shine, then you feel lonely. Above all I think that you do that if you've had a relation to people and then it comes to show that you haven't. (yes) Because that, that is something I think you experience way too often and then you feel lonely. [appears low-spirited] ... // but I think that ... for me, I mean the moment when I've felt most lonely ... it is ... it is when I sort of realized that [xx] isn't always there for you, one hundred per cent, and that is a very painful insight, (mm) when you realize you know that the people you believe are on your side come rain come shine and all,

really aren't. I think that is the worst feeling of loneliness.

To be afraid of loneliness appears to incorporate a fear of being abandoned yet again. Trust in other people is shaken; even trust in people close to you appears to become weaker:

... you know, every time you discover that someone you think you can trust and you can't, you know when you feel that you don't have anyone to confide in, someone you can't quite trust, then you feel lonely.

To have been close and then lose that closeness can be difficult, even if one has not been let down. A woman tells of an intense week with her friends and how this companionship was replaced by loneliness when, after that week, they could not be together anymore. Another woman tells of a close relative that died, one she had a close relationship with: they were like "a unit". A divorced man tells of the loneliness he feels when he "returns" his child after a weekend or a week together; it is as though "something has been taken from me". If one has been close to someone and then loses this companionship, a special unit of companionship is lost, and loneliness is a present, at least momentarily.

The loneliness felt when someone should be around but is not, is characterized by loss, but also of longing; a longing to share one's life or an aspect of it with someone else, to "be with" someone, or do something with others. There is a meaning of "wanting to share one's life and to be seen by someone else". There can be a particular difficulty in the inability of connecting with (significant) others, an inability to break the loneliness. It is not always so easy to soothe this longing for companionship.

This double feeling of loss and longing is particularly clear in some informants, not least in one young woman that ended up in a situation where two friends suddenly excluded her from their group. A feeling of guilt and bewilderment becomes apparent; "sad", "fed up and ... bewildered". She wondered what she had done wrong, as they "shut her out".

In one sense, loneliness, as a condition where others' companionship is absent, is a lack of someone to talk to or to do something with. This meaning is especially apparent in the interviews with some youths. One example:

It's not so much fun being on your own. Because you want someone to talk to and ... it feels ... I feel tired in the evenings. It's a bit hard to eat on

your own at home. And no one to be with. You don't feel like doing much more than just sit at home and watch telly ... entertain yourself.

This feeling of loneliness, however, is not connected to a certain age. A longing to share one's life, or parts of it, appears to exist in all ages. One older woman tells of her difficult loneliness, to not have anyone to share with, to be with: "The loneliness is devilish, I'll tell you. If you're used to having someone next to you all your life it's terrible. I can't help it but it is."

One man, who in his caring profession meets many older people, tells of his fear of loneliness in one's older days:

... well, maybe you don't have any friends left alive, maybe they're already gone or in a care home somewhere. You don't have anyone to share your memories with, your ... [Silence] well your shared times, thoughts and, yes, who speaks your own language somehow from the time you've lived in, but that you only have younger people around you and I think, I know, that many elders can be so tired from talking to younger.

(In what way, what makes them tired?)

They speak two languages I'd say, it could be wrong to say it like that but, well, [Silence] they can't manage, they needed their, no, I can't explain it, it's difficult as I'm not there. But I know that they experience it that way, many elders, that you can get so tired from only talking to younger people. You need your own generation, sort of.

One can feel lonely and "small" if one has no one to share one's thoughts, feelings or activities with, or to share one's daily life with. However, if loneliness is too vain, this person cannot be "anyone". It has to be someone who has the ability to understand.

Even if loneliness where others are absent is about difficult experiences and involves a strong feeling, it can also be indefinite in one sense; a subtle feeling. One becomes sad inside, "deep inside it feels sad, sort of".

It doesn't have to be a feeling that permeates everything but some sort of, er, you know, subtle feeling that somehow affects you, I think, somehow.

(How do you mean?)

Well, it doesn't have to be like it takes over your daily life, and you just think 'Oh, god I'm so lonely', but it can be some sort of subtle feeling like, deep inside you, that you think it is something that's missing or someone missing ... (mm) ... I think... // It's a sort of gnawing feeling.

Manifest or subtle, loneliness creates a stress reaction. For example, informants describe how the senses can let you down, and that they do not see or hear as normal. When the loneliness becomes too strong one has to "turn off" to manage, "... you turn off one part of yourself to not be engulfed by it ..."

Lastly, the loneliness without others can be such an ugly thing that one has to escape it, even if one at the same time hurts oneself.

... and as soon as that ugly one shows his face, you do something, go out to look for people, eat sweets, have a drink, there are many ways to escape. And you do that often I think. I've done that too.

Loneliness with others

Another meaning of the phenomenon loneliness is when one is lonely with others. Here, the feature of isolation seems more apparent than when there are no others around "... when you feel lonely because you're bored you can go home to someone, but if I'm with people and still feel lonely then there's nowhere to go. That's the worst." This meaning of loneliness sometimes occurs when there are many people around, e.g. at big parties, but there is no one with which to relate in a more true sense: "I can sit in a room with loads of people but I can still feel lonely ...". There are others nearby not offering genuine companionship but something superficial. Then one can instead choose to be lonely, that is, *without* others, rather than loneliness *with* others.

One can be lonely in closer companionships as well. The relationship between loneliness and companionship becomes evident in the loneliness that can be found in someone who lives with a partner but who does not "see" the other. One man tells of how he, despite living with a partner, has felt very lonely.

It might be the longest *lasting* loneliness in quite a long while. // It was a rather constant loneliness for ... for a longer period when ... it was for me a terrible loneliness, not to be seen by the one you love [the voice does not carry] to not be needed, to not count ... and to always *give* and never re-

ceive. ... That was loneliness for me then. // To not be seen, to not be acknowledged.

There might be other people nearby, but they do not understand, or they misunderstand, or make you feel excluded in other ways, which creates loneliness. An aspect of loneliness that can appear, even if others are present, is the feeling of being different. Companionship and connection is broken, one does not belong to the others when one is different from them. One woman tells of her experience of loneliness owing to being disabled and dependant on her walking frame, which makes her different and feel stared at. Another informant tells of her loneliness, and that she feels "odd" among other women who have children because she has none, or when others go to have lunch at a time of the day when she is never hungry. Another informant tells of the feeling of feeling odd and different when one is sober when everyone else drinks alcohol, and then one feels lonely.

There are implications in the interview material that signifies that loneliness appears because there are too many people around. If there are many people around, it can be more difficult to establish contacts with someone special and in that way build a companionship or connection to oneself. One informant changed workplaces and thereafter felt lonely at work. She reflects upon what has been said and that loneliness in the present case is probably to do with it being more difficult to get to know the others when they are so many, and that it concerns the connection mentioned above, of "belonging".

To be different and lonely, and not be able to do something about one's situation comprises feelings of vulnerability. A painful vulnerability is described by an informant that remembers his school years when he felt particularly lonely. He was different from his friends and was embarrassed about that, and did not want them to "discover" his situation. He speaks of his situation as "isolation". He did have one friend that he describes as "a protection". Together with this friend, he was not alone and did not attract others' attention so easily. Thus, this describes loneliness when the protection is to seek oneself away from others. This meaning became evident on the days when the important friend was not present. Then he was afraid to be seen, and did not want to "be noticed": "So I sat on the toilet during every break. ... // ... then I ran down, er, in a, in a booth there, second booth on the left in the first row. I sat there during the breaks." The young boy thus somehow experienced a double loneliness.

Loneliness as felt by persons needing care

Another particular meaning of being lonely, when others are present, is described as the loneliness felt by those in care. Some informants tell of when they were patients and the loneliness they felt when they had not been understood by the doctor or some other carer they put great trust in:

It's become a bit strange sometimes, when I've been ... with some doctors. ... You've sat down and then ... they don't seem to understand or it's as if they've been very stressed, sort of. Then you can feel ... well a bit pitiful, sort of overrun [laughter] ... or something.

(How do you experience the fact that you haven't been understood?)

[Silence] Well, it's sometimes when you've tried to explain how it feels and they ... sort of ... don't listen or take it in, but just ... rush on and nothing sort of comes of it ... what you have asked. (Can you elaborate a bit more?) ... well, I might've asked questions and ... and I don't really get any answers ... yes ... that can feel uncomfortable ... it can feel like ... nothing comes of it so it ... I might as well not have bothered.

The loneliness that can arise in healthcare is the same as described above, but in this context, loneliness has greater power, as it concerns people who are vulnerable because of their sufferings and need for care. When one turns to a carer and reveals one's need of help, it is difficult to be left alone with one's worries; to not be seen with one's suffering.

It's lonely being a patient...//... to them I was someone who interrupted. I was definitely not a person but a [diagnosis] and the less they were moved by me or saw me ... *the better* they thought. ... that sort of loneliness gives absolutely *no* security. I dread if I have to die from this and suffer from this. ... Not so much for the suffering and the death, I think, but for the loneliness ... to all healthy idiots that work in healthcare and don't understand a thing. They don't *want* to get it ... they don't want to understand ... they don't want to meet the person behind the illness and the *person's loneliness*.

This informant eventually left her care unit, and in the end found support and understanding elsewhere. The informant tells of one particular carer at the new place: "She *dared* to meet my suffering, my angst and my straight answers without backing ... why are

there so few people like that in healthcare? Have they all shut off their emotions?"

An elderly woman living in a nursing home says about her carers: "I can tell by my watch when they are late, then they don't have time to talk to me." There are many explanations to why carers leave their caretakers in loneliness; but whatever reason, the loneliness can be hard to experience and hard to understand:

Loneliness, oh, it's terrible, and I think it's strange you know, they have such nice big machines but why is there no music being played? They haven't got anyone to take care of it. There's no one that works then. The ones in the dining hall leave at half past three, so they haven't got any time, or they've got their own thing to do. We could sit down there, I mean, and have coffee and listen to music. No, that wouldn't work. So it's difficult.

Additionally, as a relative of someone looking for help in healthcare one can feel lonely because of the vulnerability that follows from not being seen, when one experiences that the carers neither want to see the patients' nor the relatives' sufferings:

... I've been to Casualty a number of times with my old aunt (laughter) ... I've always felt lonely then ... terribly lonely, even though the place is packed with people ... I try to make eye contact with someone so that they can see her and that she isn't doing well ... but no one ... they just walk past and ... look away ... that loneliness ... you can feel immensely lonely ... even though you sit there and it's full of people that really could help you ... but they look away ... I feel that I don't exist ... a feeling of that I probably don't exist ... [laughter] perhaps ... I don't have to be here, they don't want me here ... I know ... yes ... I know that [xx] has written a thesis on the experience of being in Casualty ... and describes relatives ... very much and loneliness ... well, now I'm adding my interpretation here ... you ... are safe now that you have arrived there and now I'm going to get help and then time passes and no one sees you ... that makes you insecure, because if no one sees if anything happens to me, if I die, no one hears me or if something happens because I'm all alone here ... that you can hear even if you're in there to get help ... and it might become even stronger then ... those feelings ... so it's a lot about being seen, I think ... to be seen as a person. Wherever you are, you want to be seen ... if you're not seen, you're lonely. ...

Not to be seen is painful in general. Not to be seen being a patient in need of care is especially painful.

Loneliness is strange, wrong, ugly or even shameful

A constituting meaning of loneliness is that it in general is no good. If one is lonely, one is “wrong” or “strange”. Loneliness can also be “shameful”, something “taboo”. One who is lonely is of a “lower rank” and has “lower status” than one who is not. Loneliness as something “ugly” is referred to as a general opinion.

... and I have always been told that loneliness is something shameful, that one always has to do something, you know it's taken many years 'til now, now I've started to feel, sort of, okay it's Friday or Saturday night, you know, and [the boyfriend] is going out, then I shouldn't be ashamed of staying at home, but it's still a bit like that, you know, God, I'm strange wanting to stay home alone. I still find it difficult to feel that (mm), you know, this with and ... and ... it is you know ... because I have some friends that like to be on their own, they don't want to go out on a Saturday night for example because they feel that no, I want to be on my own (yes), they're lone wolves and that's something I find very difficult to understand as well, because I believe I'm affected by that view, and I think it's something, you know that view on loneliness and very ... you know ... how you've experienced it in ... in your childhood and so ... er (mm) ... because I think I'd appreciate loneliness a lot more if I hadn't been, the whole time, 'impregnated' that it's so wrong and so ... you know ... that it's something negative ... (mm) ... that there are times when you don't have any friends and then you sit at home alone, you know. So that has caused me to always activate myself, I'm always doing things on Friday and Saturday nights, because those are the evenings when you're supposed to do that (mm) ... otherwise it points at some deficit in me ... [silence]

(But if you don't do anything?)

Then I have to, somehow, I honestly believe, that I somehow must justify; 'no, but I have a bit of a headache today' or er ... 'I have to work tomorrow' ... And that's a shame really, because I mean, I think there are very few that think about it in the same way. ...

To be alone is a deficit one is ashamed of. The deficit is, however, less serious if one is lonely for a

particular reason. Further, there are informants who ponder during the interview, and from being convinced that loneliness is just “wrong” and “ugly”, they reach the conclusion that it does not necessarily have to be so, but that loneliness could actually be something good. Loneliness is okay, if it was not so negative ...

Loneliness is restful and creative

Loneliness can also be something very good, something powerful that comes in the same package as rest, calm and peace, and involves a sense of serenity. This is loneliness one chooses or that is voluntary. For one or another reason, other peoples' companionship is rejected, at least for a while. One takes a break from companionship.

One informant, who earlier in the interview told about painful loneliness, later on says regarding chosen loneliness, that then she sees “... this light ... hmm ... early summer day by the jetty where the sun is shining [appears moved]. Then you're pretty happy I think ... // that's harmony ... // rest, somehow.”

To make sure one is left alone for a while is like giving oneself a gift. One gives oneself a bit of time and space. Such loneliness is stimulating, even “harmonic”, and gives rise to creativity, thought and reflection. The chosen loneliness is “light” and “pleasant” and it is “wonderful that it's quiet”. It is loneliness that gives “inner peace and calm”, “the body is calm” and then one can “relax”. Being lonely this way involves “purity”.

The need to share, I think is a great need and some things you can share with yourself, and some things you can only, or I can, only experience when I'm on my own. // When I'm lonely I feel clearer that I am part of life.

The connectedness that we above can see happen with others and that is gone in some meanings of loneliness can obviously also happen due to loneliness. To choose loneliness can involve a feeling of “landing”. In this pleasant and resting loneliness you “connects to yourself”, “you get to have your own thoughts”. To choose another context than others companionship can involve choosing oneself, to be with oneself:

... loneliness is a bit like recharging or charging, you know, and I like being on my own ... sometimes. I think it's nice and ... well I need it to feel good. You know, sit and read or do some gardening or just walk around and potter about ... in and

out of the house. If I get too little loneliness I feel really stressed.

Another person tells how she experience things in a different way that comes “from inside of me” when she is lonely. One can “be homesick for” such loneliness. Interestingly enough, even in this loneliness time can stand still. One can go on holiday to different places, to different countries, but one ought perhaps to “go on holiday to loneliness”, to be with oneself, which can be both thrilling and scary, because “. . . if you meet yourself, you’re never sure what you’ll meet . . .”

This ‘good’ loneliness is seemingly not always easy to control. It seems in many ways to have conditions connected. Most importantly, it is loneliness you seek. If loneliness involves a loss, or something that has been taken from the one left lonely, something that person wants, but not then, “then you can’t rest in yourself”. One also has to dare being lonely with oneself. To dare to meet oneself is important according to the following statement:

. . . if you don’t dare to be lonely with yourself, you sort of lose the core of what is you. // . . . I think that is one of our great existential traumas somehow, this about us meeting ourselves and daring to make something of it, that’s what I think. And we never do unless we meet ourselves alone in loneliness.

Even the forced loneliness can become positive if one dares to meet oneself, without others present.

. . . if you already earlier, if you sort of have it in your life pattern to be on your own sometimes, to be lonely, to meet yourself and see all the positive you can get from it and the strength it can give, then I think you can handle it.

Among other things, some kind of personal strength is needed to enjoy loneliness. However, it is an ability that can be developed:

. . . I mean it gets better and better the older you get, that you sort of learn and realise that it isn’t . . . er . . . some popularity contest and that you actually can appreciate and be on your own (mm) and so on // Because the more you find yourself and become safe in yourself, I believe you become surer about who you are and what you do in different situations, you don’t need others’ approval in the same way. That’s really good (mm) so that . . . I think that with the years . . . I haven’t liked being on my own before. . . .

Even informants who describe deep suffering in connection with loneliness can tell of moments of restful and pleasant loneliness. It can involve “no drive!” and nagging, even from people close by. In other interviews it is stated that it is not either/or, but that one can suffer from loneliness some times and enjoy it other times. Companionship can still be considered important, but does not exclude that one occasionally chooses to be alone. It might even be that one enjoys others companionship even more, if one mixes it with loneliness.

To have a connection with another context

We find that the loneliness can seem pleasant and restful, and appear to entice creativity and thought can also be the loneliness where one seeks oneself away from others to oneself. This should not, however, be interpreted as situations without context, because there are other contexts, other connections, other companionships than the one present humans can offer.

The interviews provide rich descriptions of such contexts and companionships. Nature appears to have the quality of a context where one can feel at home, feel rest, calm and peace, stillness, joy and creativity. Walks in the forest or gardening are examples of pleasant and restful loneliness. Companionship with animals also appears to involve something more. In such a companionship, one is lonely but feels good about it—even if there are feelings of hard loneliness in relation to other companionships. Animals and nature seem to offer a companionship that is an essential connection to everything else.

One particular way of experiencing loneliness is to connect with virtual companionship that seems to erase the hard loneliness in favour of a pleasant one: “So there are lots of friends that you can talk to on the Internet, you know. You don’t get so very lonely.” Even if the Internet is an everyday medium for youngsters, there are some important differences between this and other types of companionship:

(Does it feel the same to be together on the net as it does to be together normally?)

No, it’s not the same. But you can imagine. But it’s only words you write, you know. If it’s real, you talk to one another. You see the person. You can feel. You can read one another. It’s much more fun. You feel . . . you have friends around you. That’s just how it is. When you meet people, it just seems more real. You sort of talk more. (Do you mean that it’s not real when you get together on the Internet?) Well, it can be real too. But you feel

that it's more fun to be with the person than with the Internet.

(You said that you can talk more. . .)

Yes . . . there are lots of other things when you meet. You can . . . talk things through on the Internet but it is much more social to talk to the person in reality. (Can you give me an example?) You talk more about general stuff on the computer, you know . . . you don't ask how you're doing . . . no, you could do that . . . well, I don't know. It's a lot more fun to talk to the person, but not with a computer, but to talk in reality . . . I don't know. It just feels like that. (When you meet your friends, do you just talk?) No, we do stuff as well. We play football, go to the cinema and parties and so on. You can't do that via the Internet.

Meetings outside the world of the computers offer an embodiedness that the virtual world cannot compete with, but alternatively there is an anonymity that can be filled with a certain function.

Occupation is also something that can offer a context. One can look for a certain connection, some form of companionship, by having something meaningful to do in one's loneliness. An elderly woman in sheltered housing describes her loneliness as something she tries to disperse with listening to her many music cassettes, which gave her pleasure. Another woman replied on the question what she does when she feels lonely:

There's a lot of TV. (Do you sit and watch or . . .) I sit in front of the TV. And I read a lot as well. . . . But it depends a bit . . . because sometimes it's hard to concentrate and then . . . then I try with those audio books. // . . . but I try not to watch too much TV either, but rather go out or listen to the radio for a while . . . I also have embroidery lying about. . . .

Loneliness when others are not there can still mean something good as long as you connect with something in some way.

Companionship that constitutes the outer horizon of loneliness

It is not possible to understand the phenomenon of loneliness without forming its outer horizon, which is the companionship without which one is lonely. However, it is important not to polarize loneliness and companionship, to introduce a dichotomy between these existential meanings, as they are one

another's conditions the same way as darkness and light, evil and good. In fact, the research shows that one who is in a strong companionship also can be lonely, and one who can welcome loneliness is capable of going into companionship with other people. Loneliness and companionship have a complex connection, or rather: loneliness and companionship are really one, an existential unity.

Companionship is important. If there are others who are available for companionship, one has access to support and security and there is someone to share with, to do something with, to have fun with or to be sad with, simply one to talk to about anything, or just be with. Neither companionship nor loneliness are restricted to time and space: "When I have my partner, I'm never really lonely. Even if we're on either side of the planet you still have someone you know is a part of you (mm) and then you're not lonely that way. . . ."

One young man describes how he often feels lonely but that the feeling is eased when he has telephone contact with near relatives that live far away whom he for that reason cannot meet very often. The distance disappears when the feeling of contact appears:

It means a lot to me because I've known them all my life. They're very close to me. They're really very close to me. I've met them since I was really little and they used to look after me.

(How does it feel when you talk to them on the phone? Do you feel lonely then?)

No, I don't feel lonely. // . . . I can imagine that they're here. When I talk to the person over there I imagine that that person is here.

"We are born social beings", as one informant expresses it. Who we are, what we label our identity, is affected by this companionship, especially with important others. However, companionship is not limited to the time spent with other people, and companionship with something else important than people can provide context. One needs to belong with someone or something. However, without such companionship or connectedness one is really lonely.

Discussion and conclusions

The intertwining of loneliness and togetherness is essential to the present empirical analysis, but it is no new idea for philosophers of existential phenomenology, such as Merleau-Ponty (1995/1945) and Heidegger (1998/1927). For them, loneliness cannot be understood in another way than in relation to our

existence with others. This co-existence is in an ontological way the foundation for how we can understand existence. According to Merleau-Ponty (1968/1948, 1995/1945) and Heidegger (1998/1927) being is always about “being in a world”, and the world is always something that we share with others. In the case when I want to understand myself, I have to understand how I am in relation to the others and the world. When we want to understand others, we have to understand them in relation to ourselves and the world.

Consequently, the phenomenon loneliness must be understood as something belonging to “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1998/1927) or to “the flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968/1948), which is described by philosophy as well as the empirical data in this analysis. Loneliness is a phenomenon that is intimately tied to the whole of existence and existence with others. Heidegger (1998/1927) points out how being-with is an existential characteristic even in cases when others are not present: “Even Dasien’s Being-alone is being-with in the world. The Other can be *missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with; its very possibility is the proof of this” (p. 157). Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty point to the essence of loneliness that also became explicit in the empirical analysis: a conclusion is that loneliness explicates our relationship with the world; it can relate us to the world and make the connection closer and stronger, but loneliness can also make the world more remote and leave us without connection, completely abandoned.

As other phenomenologically oriented existential philosophers, also Sartre (1998) emphasises our co-existence. His famous example from the Parisian café world is brilliant and it further illustrates the meaning of loneliness when an important other is not there:

Sartre has an appointment with Pierre at a café at four o’clock in the afternoon. He is delayed and he does not come to the café until quarter past four. He knows that Pierre always is on time so he swiftly enters the café and looks around to see where Pierre is, if he still is there. However, it seems that Pierre is not there anymore. In this situation, Sartre does not discover the absence of Pierre at a particular part of the café. Contrary it is the case that Pierre is absent from the whole café. In this situation, the café is characterized by Pierre’s absence. It is no longer “any café” but that very café where Pierre is not.

With Sartre, we can conclude that loneliness is the absence of presence. He allows us to understand that difficult loneliness can never be seen as absence in general, but an absence of someone who should be present. His example also gives us to understand the depth of such loneliness: it is not only he who is

changed the whole café is different. We now can see more clearly the empirical aspect of how loneliness can characterise a whole situation at a particular time, how everything for a while can be coloured by the experience of some particular loneliness. By this, Sartre also helps us understand why it is the case that we are not affected in the same way by all kinds of loneliness.

The phenomenological philosophy further illuminates the temporal and spatial meanings of the experience of loneliness that is shown by the empirical analysis. Loneliness is a phenomenon that transcends time and space. Heidegger (1998/1927) is critical to the understanding of time as something measurable, and where all hours and minutes are equally long. According to Merleau-Ponty (1995/1945), “now” includes earlier experiences as well as those that are expected in future time. In loneliness, time is relative. In loneliness, time is in a lived relationship with us humans and our intentions. Loneliness is thus related to “life-world time”. Consequently, we have to understand that a piece of time that clockwise is “short time” for a person experiencing difficult loneliness it could feel as eternal time and never-ending suffering. Alternatively, the opposite, “long time” can disappear in a moment of happy, longed-for loneliness. This insight, we can conclude, is important not least to those who are interested in health and well-being.

The present research shows that loneliness is a phenomenon that is closely related to its context. On the one hand, in the experience of difficult, suffering loneliness, there is an explicit absence of important “others” as well as an absence of context. On the other hand, in the peaceful, even harmonious loneliness there is a context of something else than other humans. People who choose loneliness try to connect to “something else” than humans. However, contrary to what is sometimes suggested in other research (cf. Rew, 2000), this study does not confirm that people who choose other contexts than other humans, e.g. pets, nature, necessarily do that as a substitute for missing fellows. Instead, a different picture is formed by people who describe their longing for a more profound context with something greater than themselves, and more peaceful than their more immediate everyday context. The descriptions in this research touch upon experiences that reveal the search for more immanent and transcendent meanings with the goal of finding oneself in the roar of everyday existence.

Moustakas (1961; 1972; 1975) has made several wonderful illustrations of the enigmatic loneliness, of how loneliness both means leaving something behind and coming to something. He describes the relationship between loneliness and others, e.g. how

a particular group can make you shake by anguish or make you feel at home and how broken communication can break up the lifeworld. Not least does he point to an essential aspect of loneliness when relating it to love and the struggle to become someone. He gives many lived examples of how self-knowledge grows in relation to others as well as in solitude and loneliness.

Compared to other research, the present results come close to the findings of Kirova (1999; 2000; 2004) that describe children's experiences of loneliness. Although illuminating the same essential meanings, Kirova's findings give other nuances to the phenomenon due to its emphasis on the child's lifeworld. Loneliness in children is described as both something positive and something negative. The hard experience of loneliness is, as with adults, an absence of important other fellow beings, an absence that gives birth to feelings of cold, emptiness and tension in the children. Kirova's description of how the lonely child experiences a broken relationship with the world is profound. Time stops for the lonely child, the surroundings disappear, left is only loneliness. "Children's loneliness is perhaps most painful when they feel separated, excluded, or cut off from the shared world of others", it means "inner emptiness", and "a kind of cold", Kirova (2004) concludes in her research. She (Kirova, 2000) also relates loss of self-esteem to loneliness in one's school years.

The children, however, also told Kirova (1999) about loneliness as a secret place. Such loneliness is pleasant and offers peace to children who want to get away from stressful everyday activities. Even in this form of loneliness time stops, Kirova says. One 11-year old boy in her study talked about his secret place of loneliness as something that gave him a break from and made him forget the everyday world. Loneliness as a secret place helped him to find himself and to get into an inner conversation with himself. This loneliness is described as lovely memories and a good place where he liked to be.

Even in my research, memories from the school years seemed to come easily in the interviews on loneliness. How can we understand this? Is it the case that loneliness in children and young people's life is more profound than adult loneliness? Does early loneliness shape later experiences of loneliness and of who we become? Moustakas (1972) gives a preliminary answer as he relates some pictures of what it means to be a lonely teenager:

Fourteen is sometimes the loneliest time for a child. He suddenly begins to question the important connection in his life—his family, friends, and the activities he thought represented his interests. He suddenly realizes that his fantasies, daydreams,

and ambitions are all games he has been playing and that have been played on him. He becomes aware that everything he considered real is not real anymore. He no longer knows the people he lives with or the places that have been important in his world; he doesn't know who he is anymore.

Being in a phase of life so characterized by becoming is not easy. An essential need is to stay in the movement, to go on becoming, and building a reality. However, being in a nowhere land, every other's comments and acting have great impact and can strengthen the existential movement as well as kill it. This is a context where we need much more research. We need to know better what for example schools do to young persons' existential becoming.

In the same way, we need to reflect on the loneliness that occurs in health care institutions. Illness seems to have the power of making people more sensitive to loneliness, which can be a source of well-being as well as suffering. Important then is the role of the care, which general aim is to support well-being. However, what we see from this study as well as much other research is that carers contribute to a negative experiencing of loneliness and cause suffering by not acknowledging the subjects and their lifeworlds. We can conclude that not regarding the suffering loneliness is a sad and unnecessary meaning of the power of care.

Even if the aim of this study was not to explicitly investigate the relationship between health, identity and loneliness, it is easy to see how loneliness relates to well-being. The result of the research can help us understand and look seriously upon the loneliness of people who are old and/or ill that causes a disruption of their context. All humans need to be connected; we need to be in relationship with someone or something else. We develop a sense of self, "who I am", in relation to other people, and we need to be seen, liked, confirmed and valued by them in order to see, like, confirm and value ourselves. On this basis, we connect with and belong to a world. Such context has the power of contributing to health and the experience of well-being. If this context is not part of existence, loneliness is less likely experienced as something good and can instead be something "bitter".

In the everyday understanding, loneliness is the opposite of commonality. Being alone and loneliness is seen as the opposite of being together with someone else. The empirical analysis, as well as the phenomenological philosophy, shows that loneliness is the figure against a background of commonality; being-alone is the other side of being-with; loneliness is intertwined with togetherness. This understanding of existence gives us a more ambiguous picture. It is

not necessarily the case that being-together is a harmonious characterisation of life. Heidegger (1998/1927), among others, reveals how we do not always live a true existence together, but live side-by-side without interest in or care for each other. According to Heidegger, it is also the case that this Being-alone not necessarily disappears if some human beings come to my side. The empirical analysis is in accordance with Heidegger, that a person can experience loneliness even in the midst of a group of people, or with her/his partner, that the presence of others not necessarily relieves the suffering of loneliness. It also seems to be the case that loneliness can be something very difficult when there are people around that could mean an experience of being-together, but that denies another person this opportunity.

Humans in the 21st century recognize the experience of loneliness in big areas of living, in big apartment blocks, in big places of work, or at big dinner parties, where many humans are around, even close, but still absent from a true presence. This emptiness in human relationships help us understand why people long for other kinds of commonality, other contexts of being-with and context than that which other humans can offer. If a profound sense of companionship and context belongs to one's everyday experiences, a secret place of loneliness may be what modern people need. In such secret places, where we cannot be reached unless we want to, we can let go of stressful human relationships and welcome other dialogues, with ourselves, with nature, with the world, with something that is more than oneself. Such loneliness has the power of contributing to health and well-being.

Acknowledgements

I thank the students who provided me with good interviews, and I thank Anna-Maria Hipkiss who has checked the English language.

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