

# Understanding Loneliness in Pre- and Post-Pandemic Times

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**Abstract.** Loneliness was one the most important matters during The Covid Pandemic. This paper claims that this “lonely situation” was a previous cultural condition. Loneliness belongs to a certain style of life of the Western Culture as an effect of the cultural *way of living* during the last decades. For this purpose, we will show the way loneliness has been researched during the last 70 years, which is mostly from a psychological and emotional point of view. On the opposite, we will show 2 reasonings to declare the “emotional loneliness” not enough in order to understand this phenomenon. Finally, we will introduce structural cultural elements – taking Sweden as an example of a very modern western socialdemocracy – to show loneliness as way of life and not only a way of feeling. That conclusion allows us to re-ask the cultural control of an isolated individual in pre-Pandemic times.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, Emotion, Anthropology of Loneliness, Way of living.

## Introduction

Loneliness became an important topic during the 1960’s, mostly in the USA. In 1950, Reissman published *The Lonely Crowd* (Reisman et al. 1950), but his attention was focused on the effects of the new industrialization, etc. Loneliness was at that moment a subtopic derived from other social

subjects rather than a cause by itself (Homer 2017). In 1958, Witzleben had published his study on loneliness – similar to Frieda Fromm-Reichmann –, observing two broad and open meanings of it: “(1) Loneliness which is caused by the loss of an object (being abandoned, deserted, Sartre’s ‘délaissement’). This kind of loneliness I shall call secondary loneliness. (2) The loneliness of one’s ‘self,’ inborn in everyone –the feeling of being alone and helpless in this world. This I shall call primary loneliness” (Witzleben 1958, 34). Witzleben and Fromm-Reichmann understood loneliness in an existential-psychiatric way: “loneliness and the danger and threat of nothingness must and can be conquered by man’s ability for ego integration” (Witzleben 1958, 43).

## 1. The Contemporary Way of Understanding Loneliness: The Way of Feeling

Loneliness showed up as a quantitative social phenomenon in 1965, when NORC (*National Opinion Research Center*) published data for the first time, showing that 26% of Americans *felt lonely* or *isolated* (Bradburn and Caplovitz 1965). In 1973 Weiss offered 6 criteria for measuring it. Loneliness could be “quantified” in relation to personal attachments based on individual safety and security, social integration, opportunity for nurture, reassurance of work, reliable alliance, and guidance (Weiss 1973, Weiss 1975). This survey was improved with the 1978 UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al. 1978, 290–294). In 1980, those criteria were reviewed again and sometimes controversial (Austin 1983, 85).

Despite Gordon’s and Slaters’ essays (Slater 1970, Gordon 1976), the distinction provided by Weiss (Weiss, 1973) between “social loneliness” and “emotional loneliness” was widely accepted (Perlman and Peplau 1984, 17). Loneliness was the proportional consequence between social exogenous factors and inner cognitive-behavioral ones related with psychological factors of personalities. It was defined according to two criteria: on the one hand *social contexts and factors*, such as rural environment (Kivett 1979) or a specific social site, such as the University, gender (Maroldo 1981), or aging (Fidler 1976), and on the other the predisposition to-

wards solitude due to temper, or the tendency towards isolation arising from *individual personality* (Jones, Freeman and Goswick 1981, 27–48). As Jones suggested, one loneliness was defined as “situational”, and the other was more “dispositional” (Jones 1981).

Vicenzi and Graboski had offered new inputs to measure loneliness (Vicenzi and Graboski 1987). However, the XXI century witnessed new approaches beyond psychology and sociology. Crandal and Hojat were part of that significant movement towards a new methodology (Crandal and Hojat 1989) from the perspectives of neurobiochemistry. Loneliness was not an exclusive matter of social sciences anymore, although the main topic studied continued to be “feeling alone”.

This new approach was a combination of Social and Natural Sciences, creating what was coined as “social neuroscience” (Berntson et al. 2000). The goal was to look deeper into the physiological effects of loneliness. In fact, this new methodology changed the ways in which loneliness was measured, and the results (Hughes et al. 2004). Demographically, the scenario was changing. The elder population was a new public health issue (Sorkin, and Rook 2002 and 2004). Liu and Rook described how the adverse effects of loneliness on health and well-being accelerate with age (Liu and Rook 2013). Europe had this problem as well.

This new approach was embraced by John Cacioppo, probably the most well-known researcher of the last decade on loneliness. Cacioppo began his studies with Hawkey, having “aging” as his main topic (Hawley and Cacioppo 2005, 2007). His approach was mostly neuroscience and social neuroscience. Cacioppo revealed that “social isolation has an impact on health comparable to the effect of high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, or smoking” (Cacioppo 2008, 5). It was not Cacioppo’s approach to reject the psychological ideas but to make them more complex, thus taking into account the physiological, neurological and public health effects of the phenomenon. “Loneliness becomes an issue of serious concern only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations and behaviors” (Cacioppo 2008, 7). Cacioppo explained how loneliness was a health epidemic (Cacioppo 2016) and a major public health issue: its incidence

went from 20% to 40% of the American population. Chronic loneliness increased the odds of an early death by 20%. Which is about the same effect as obesity (Cacioppo 2016b).

However, a new input entered the scene: the new technologies. At the beginning, new ways of technological communication were hailed as capable of bringing down barriers. Turkle, who applauded the new chances provided by the new technologies in the 80's, wrote a critical review of the technological impact on the persona, and fundamentally with regard to loneliness (Turkle 2011). What was a moderate critique on *Together but alone*, became a strong and deep argument in 2015 (Turkle 2015). According to Turkle, technology “instead of encouraging us to stay connected as long as possible, would encourage us to disengage.” (Turkle 2015, esp. chap. 2).

During the XX century, throughout which the existential, psychological, sociological and social neuroscience points of view dominated, the question behind loneliness was mainly the problem of “feeling alone”. Any kind of social isolation, or neuropsychological dysphoria, came about through the emotional status of the individual. However, is that the only point of view to understand the current phenomenon of loneliness?

## 2. Demographical and Paleoanthropological Meaning of Loneliness

Although we cannot explain the cultural and philosophical history of loneliness (Anrubia 2018), we can propose two reasons for challenging the idea that loneliness has to be necessarily and mostly understood as a problem of “feeling alone”. These two reasons have an empirical and anthropological format.

### 2.1. Loneliness from a Demographical Point of View

If we take the historical continuum of the demographical worldwide database, there are 3 inputs to question loneliness as a merely emotional problem. Firstly, taking into account that *homo sapiens* is around 190.000 years

old (Rosas 2016) according to paleoanthropology, the first 175.000 years the human groups did not consist of more than 75–200 individuals (Hands 2017, 724, Tattersall 2012, 97). In the 1st century, the world population was 190 million<sup>1</sup>. In 1900, the world population was estimated at 1.65 billion. Nowadays, only in China are there more inhabitants than in the 1850's and the current Worldwide Population is 7,9 billion people.

Secondly, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) has drastically decreased in the last 70 years (after WWII). In Japan, for instance, IMR at 1950 was 50,07 (1/1000) according to UN<sup>2</sup>, but between 2005–2010 it was 2,62. In the case of non-industrialized countries, the average doesn't match that number but it has decreased by 3 during the last decades.

Thirdly, archeological studies estimated that life expectancy increased around 12 years since 10.000 a. C. until 1900. In ancient Egypt (1000 b. C.) life expectancy was 25 years of age, while in 1900 it was 37 years old. However, in XX century, taking Spain as example, life expectancy increased from 60 years of age during the 50's to 82 in 2009. The last 11 centuries humans lived 40 years on average, but in 2015 the worldwide average was 71.

Thus, how can loneliness be the case when there are so many of us, and we spend more time together? If loneliness is about feeling alone, it seems paradoxical that loneliness is a problem at all. Worldwide Population, IMP and Life Expectancy have broken all predictions, to the extent that it seems questionable to try to solve that problem exclusively by appealing to “emotions” or by defining it as simply “feeling alone”.

## 2.2. Loneliness from a Paleo-physiological and Zoological Point of View: Some Specifics of *Homo Sapiens*

Issues concerning loneliness can be questioned by looking at the human being as mammal: the *homo sapiens* baby requires extra care during the first years of life. However, the feature of *homo sapiens* pregnancy is not different from other mammals except for the specific cares for the mother

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/international-programs/-historical-est-worldpop.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

herself during the birth. That caring for motherhood is a unique feature of the female sapiens. The human birth requires company for the mother herself (midwife), and that help/company required for the mother can be explained from a physiological and paleoanthropological perspective in the hominization process.

There is a common agreement that one of the most significant changes in *homo* was the tremendous increase in the weight of the brain, as well as the cranioencephalic size, increasing 1 kg in a very short period of time –evolutionary speaking– compared to other species. (Turbón 2006, 59, Geertz 1973, 47–8). The locomotor practicability of an animal with one more kilo in its cranium (Chaline 2002, 80) forced a change of the gravitational center, to align it vertically with the cranial position (*foramen magnum*) in order to be operative in terms of motion (Turbón 2006, 44–54). Summarizing: the change led to bipedalism and to adopt an upright position. However, bipedalism created new morphoanatomical changes.

Nevertheless, there was one change never seen before (Campillo Álvarez, 2005, 167–77). The readjustment of the sacrum, the femur, etc., forced a displacement of the pelvis generating a change in the uterus and the birth canal. These changes caused an unexpected reliance for help to procure the life of off springs at birth; “because of the size of the head and his body volume, the human baby has to go through a narrow birth canal and has to twist, roll and overcome the loss of alignment between the uterus and the vagina at the most compromised place of his departure. Accordingly, the sapiens female [...] is at risk while giving birth [...]. The solution was the engagement of a third individual during the physical action of giving birth [...] and to assist the mother” (Marín 2013, 23).

The singularity of sapiens’ birth comes not ultimately from the mother-child bond but from the need of external but essential care of the mother. Human birth-giving necessarily requires previous social links. Neither the child nor the mother can be alone. Motherhood and nativity require company to be zoologically successful at birth. Loneliness would be the evolutionary doom of the specie.

Cooperative survival (Fuentes 2018) is common among other mammals, but not at birth. What paleoanthropologists suggest is that there

a is another new trait at the end of human life: burying the deceased (Marín 2013, 30). The disposition of the body, the burial location, the gathering of crafted objects, etc., are signs which show that to bury doesn't mean to hide a corpse, but to erect a signpost and to make the dead visible among the living. To create a funeral and bury a dead corpse is to establish a physical sign of the company of the deceased among the community (Aries 2000).

To make visible the dead after they've died is to understand the burial as a social fact for the "survivors" (Marín 2010, 106), that is to say, to grant the dead a meaningful bond with the ones still living. Thus, a graveyard is not a solitary location but the place where the living and the dead are in mutual company (Henry-Gambier 2001). Burials are socials because they are places that create a meaning with a social link, contributing to the generation of a community (Chaline 2002, 144–6).

If to be born requires to have a companion, at death too. We are born and pass away in company since the beginning of times. Thus, neither the demographical data nor the paleo-zoological approach suggest that the current problem of loneliness is a universal human problem.

However, is this explanation sufficient to account for emotional loneliness? Is it possible to understand the current loneliness in the western tradition with a different perspective rather than the psychological one?

### **3. Loneliness in the Modern Times: a "way of living" and Sweden as example**

We don't have enough space to develop the reasoning behind the idea of loneliness as a bearable "way of being" in religious and cultural outlooks. There are two classical passages on ancient Western tradition about it. Firstly, the biblical sentence "It's not good for the man to be alone (Ge 2:18)". Man (*isch* in hebrew) needs a "fitting helper" (female: *isch-ha*). One must keep in mind that there are different interpretations of the "fitting helper", many of them even mutually opposed (Walsh 1997, Schmid and Riedweg 2008, Pagels 1988). In any case, pure individuality is understood as metaphysically unfit (Storladen 2000, 221, Aleso 2008) for

Humankind –*Ada'ahm*– (Wolden 1989). At secondly, Aristotle's famous text: "a man who is incapable of living in community or who is so self-sufficient [...] must be a lower animal or a god" (*Politics* 1253 a 20–30). Neighborhood or basic community is part of the political friendship, and even the perfect friendship is "ἀναγκαϊότατον εἰς τὸν βίον", that is, "absolutely necessary for life". (Et. Nic. VIII, 1, 1155a 5). Something similar said Plato in the myth of Prometheus (*Protagoras* 320c–322d) and the platonic androgynous myth also shows how to be one requires two individuals (*Symposium* 189c–193e).

There is an echo of solitude in the stoicism (*autarkia*), but that remains in the inner soul of the wise man, and it doesn't affect the nature of society because the *fatum* affects all human beings (Seneca *Epist.*,91,7). Even Cicero said friendship is born "*ex abundantia*" instead of "*ex indigentia*" (Cicero *De Amicitia*, 27–29). Augustin defined the death of his friend as "my own death" and, following Aristotle, as "another self".

Loneliness is ontologically impossible in the medieval Christian tradition because God is now an eternal companion – "I call you friends" (John 15,15) – and has become everlasting presence "to the end of time" (Mt 28, 20). In that sense, Aquinas claims "*indiget enim homo ad bene operandum auxilio amicorum, tam in operibus vitae activae, quam in operibus vitae contemplativae*" (S. Th. I–II q. 4 a. 8 c.). The religious medieval orders, heirs of the eremites living in isolation (*eremite*: from the dessert) are always with the company of God. Loneliness is a way of being (not a way of feeling), bearable in human life because there is a divine company always present.

Nevertheless, things are going to change during the XIV–XV centuries. As Norbert Elias said, "homo clausus" (Elias 1982, 34) is now a new cultural figure. The new Humanism and early Modernity – with a huge influence of Luther's religious individualism – is incarnated in Descartes, who declared isolation as a condition for a truthful knowledge (*rational loneliness*). Leibniz asserted the existence of isolation (*monades*) in a metaphysical sense (*metaphysical loneliness*). Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, etc. declared a fictional but fundamental "state of nature" where human beings lived naturally without society (*fictional political loneliness*).



Bentham and Mill understood that liberty as total independence from others but not from the government (*political freedom as an isolated independence*). Kant confirmed the moral possibility to live a universal justice in complete loneliness (*moral loneliness*). Romanticism (through the idea of desire and emotions) supplied the idea of living through a way of feeling, and therefore sentimentally alone (*emotional loneliness*). During centuries, at least cultural and theoretically, thinkers have provided ways to understand the human being in a completely individualistic fashion (Anrubi 2018). Only one thing was missing to fulfill that “loneliness”: the material conditions and the type of productivity afforded by the technological industry. These now provide a real chance of living alone, independent from anyone except the State, a state of things in which loneliness only affects the emotions (Illouz 2007). That possibility came about in the second half of XX century, a century that has been called *The Lonely Century* (Hertz 2020).

The idea of freedom as total autonomy from other people is materialized empirically during the 70’s, and has been recently summarized in Berggren and Trägårdh’s book *Ar svensken manniska?* (Are Swedish Human?), where they defined “radical individualism”: “all authentic human relationship has to be based on the fundamental independence between people”, that is, to create a socio-political system whose function is to “maximize the independence of individuals” between them (Berggren and Trägårdh 2015). The structural idea is that a total autonomy of the individual will cause as an effect goodness and a fulfilled society.

We are going to take the Nordic countries (especially Sweden) to understand the effects of a way of living alone in absolute independence, entailing an understanding of the human essence as a radically individualistic “way of being”. The following data are revealing:

1. Family relationships: The average age to leave the parental house in Sweden in 2020 was 17 years old<sup>5</sup>. There is not real attachment to family duties or bonds. The family is conceived as a group of in-

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Eurostat: “Estimated average age of young people leaving the parental household by sex”. Last update: 13-05-2022. Also: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210812-1>

dividuals instead of a social unity (Palme and Mirvdal). As Åsa Regnér, Swedish Minister of Equality Issues, said (taking for granted Palme's thesis): "My parents need cares, but I am not legal or economically responsible of them: the State is"<sup>4</sup>. Family bonds are not the main frame from which to understand human relationships.

2. According to Swedish social services, the number of people dying alone (which means nobody, not even relatives, ask for his-her corpse) is 25%. During 2018–2020 over 400 bodies were found rotting alone (100 of them had been rotting for more than 3 months after their death)<sup>5</sup>. That number is increasing and is not related with poverty or economic deprivation<sup>6</sup>.
3. In the urban context, the number of householders without children is almost 50% in Sweden<sup>7</sup>, also since (pre-pandemic years: 2016 or 2018)<sup>8</sup>. The number of people over 65 living alone in Sweden represents more than 40%<sup>9</sup>.
4. According to the 2022 UN Happiness Report, Finland came in first on the list and Sweden 7<sup>th</sup><sup>10</sup>. Paradoxically, according to the OECD, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Denmark, are countries with the highest worldwide consumption of antidepressant pills, and that consumption has increased during the last ten years.
5. Human company doesn't seem to be desirable anymore. In Sweden there were 995.000 registered dogs in 2020<sup>11</sup> (only dogs). The number of children from 2015 to 2020 is around 900.000<sup>12</sup>. People choose animals instead of children, despite the fact that Sweden,

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.actuall.com/familia/asa-regner-ministra-de-igualdad-sueca-los-chicos-tambien-sufren-violencia/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/hundreds-die-alone-and-bodies-undiscovered-for-months>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thelocal.se/20170520/more-swedes-die-alone-and-with-no-money/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Household\\_composition\\_statistics#Increasing\\_number\\_of\\_households\\_consisting\\_of\\_adults\\_living\\_alone](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Household_composition_statistics#Increasing_number_of_households_consisting_of_adults_living_alone)

<sup>8</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20170905-1?inheritRedirect=true>

<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Household\\_composition\\_statistics#Increasing\\_number\\_of\\_households\\_consisting\\_of\\_adults\\_living\\_alone](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Household_composition_statistics#Increasing_number_of_households_consisting_of_adults_living_alone)

<sup>10</sup> <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2022/happiness-benevolence-and-trust-during-covid-19-and-beyond/#ranking-of-happiness-2019-2021>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/708908/number-of-registered-pet-dogs-in-sweden/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/525349/sweden-number-of-births/>

according to the UN, is one of the most advanced countries in children rights and public programs for parenthood.

6. In partner relationships, and according to the Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2017a), Sweden is first among the 28 EU member states in gender equality. However, exists what is called the “Nordic Paradox” (Vall 2017): even in a high level of gender equality, there is a high level of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) in Sweden (also other Nordic countries). After generations (culturally since Myrdal’s programs, (Myrdal 1965), the educational programs implanted many decades ago are not yielding the expected results, (Wemrell 2019), making this a yet unresolved cultural paradox.

We cannot understand all these data solely within the paradigm composed of “feeling alone” vs. “social or empirical isolation”, not even by appeal to the emotion of “feeling lonely” produced by physical isolation. Loneliness has become a “way of living” in Western Societies and not only a way of feeling. Covid Pandemic has not created a new problem, but it has surfaced what was an earlier cultural one. All the approaches described in the first epigraph of this paper share one common feature: at the end, loneliness is a feeling. However, there are new approaches saying loneliness is more a cultural issue rather than a feeling. Klinenberg described the phenomenon of “living alone” as “a sign of narcissism, fragmentation and diminished public life” (Klinenberg 2012, 6). Recently Hertz has paid attention to loneliness as a problem that encompasses economic and cultural aspects (Hertz 2020). This is the new meaning it has taken in current studies.

During the last decades nobody foresaw that loneliness would become a real possibility to create a lifestyle. If Covid Pandemic has represented a crisis for the current cultural western system, then the pandemic was a relevant cause for showing the weaknesses of the cultural system itself, and not the cause of loneliness. If the Pandemic has not disintegrated the cultural system, then the Pandemic itself could be understood as an accelerator of loneliness instead of a social warning or a sign of cultural change. From that point of view, a question can be raised: are pandemic times a cultural catalyst of pre-pandemic loneliness? And if so, is this cul-

tural situation a veiled opportunity to control this isolated individual? Finally, is it a good social understanding to show loneliness in the exclusive light of an emotional phenomenon, thus hiding its sociocultural causes?

## 4. Two Biblical Ideas to Approach Loneliness

### 4.1. Leaving from Others

Taking the classical passage of Genesis, there is a way of understanding loneliness as “leaving from others”, that is to say, to be separated: “This is why a man leaves his father and mother”. It is impossible metaphorically speaking to understand that sentence as referring to the parents of Adam and Eve. Thus, all kind of loneliness or separation or even isolation, is always metaphysical and empirically speaking “a second moment”. To leave, to be left or being alone, is always to leave from somebody. Thus, loneliness can never be a primary value of the human being. Because of that, leaving is always leaving from an “us”, and also understanding God in the same way, a trinitarian God in his way of being and being called (Strumiłowski 2019).

### 4.2. Freedom and Loneliness

Loneliness can be properly understood as a phenomenon of the human decision. All good or evil is always related to the good or evil of the others *related to me*, even in the resentment (Belmonte 2020). It is the act of freedom where liberty is not an independent exclusion from the others but where the freedom of the individual is untranslatable or transferable to any other person or people, even God’s Freedom itself. A well understood loneliness can be faced like the place of encounter with someone else from the absolute responsibility and liberty. From that perspective the modern and contemporary transformation of loneliness into a individualistic way of living or a mere feeling it is not responding to the question.

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