Loneliness across cultures

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Henry Latham Follow
Founder @scribeapp.co | Featured in Thrive Global, The Guardian, Writing Cooperative, UX Planet | Writer, designer, entrepreneur, sandwich-eater
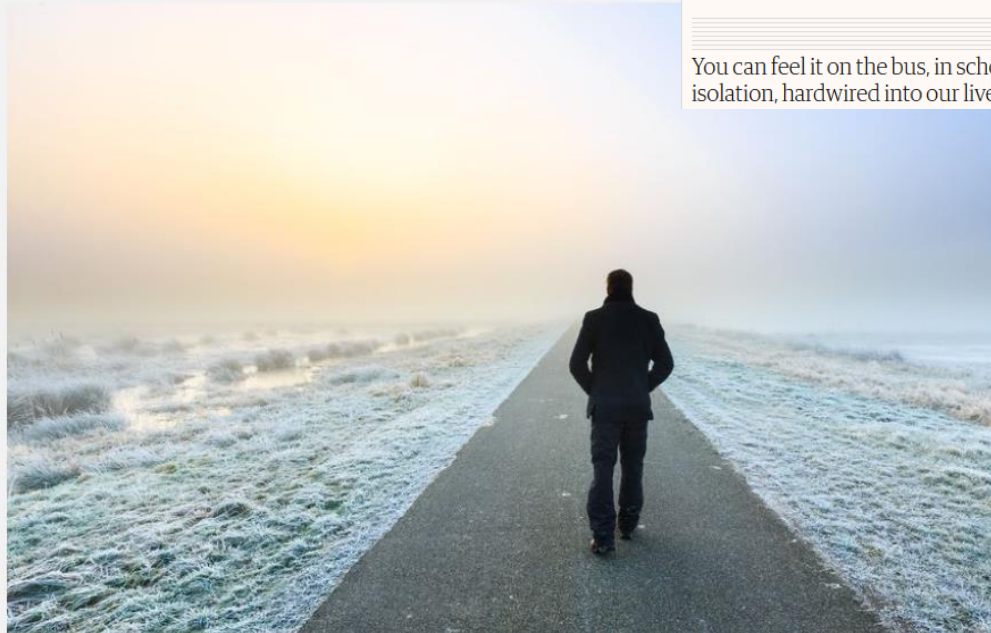Aug 2 · 6 min read

Why You Feel So Lonely

From Tribalism to Inc

Get the Friends You Want
by Paul Sanders

Does Individualism Make You Lo

Modern life is lonely. We all need someone to help
Deborah Orr

You can feel it on the bus, in school, at the shops: the threat of isolation, hardwired into our lives

most viewed

'You caused enough d
MPs react to David Ca
rumoured return

Lion Air crash: pilot o
flight asked to turn pl
around

Japanese island disap
without anyone notic

The "Cultural Paradox of Loneliness"

People in collectivistic societies do not seem to feel less lonely than people in individualistic societies

(e.g., Anderson, 1999; Fokkema et al., 2012; Imamoğlu et al., 1993; Jones et al., 1985; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Sundström et al., 2009; Swader, 2019; Walker, 1993; Yang & Victor, 2011; cf. Barreto et al., 2020)
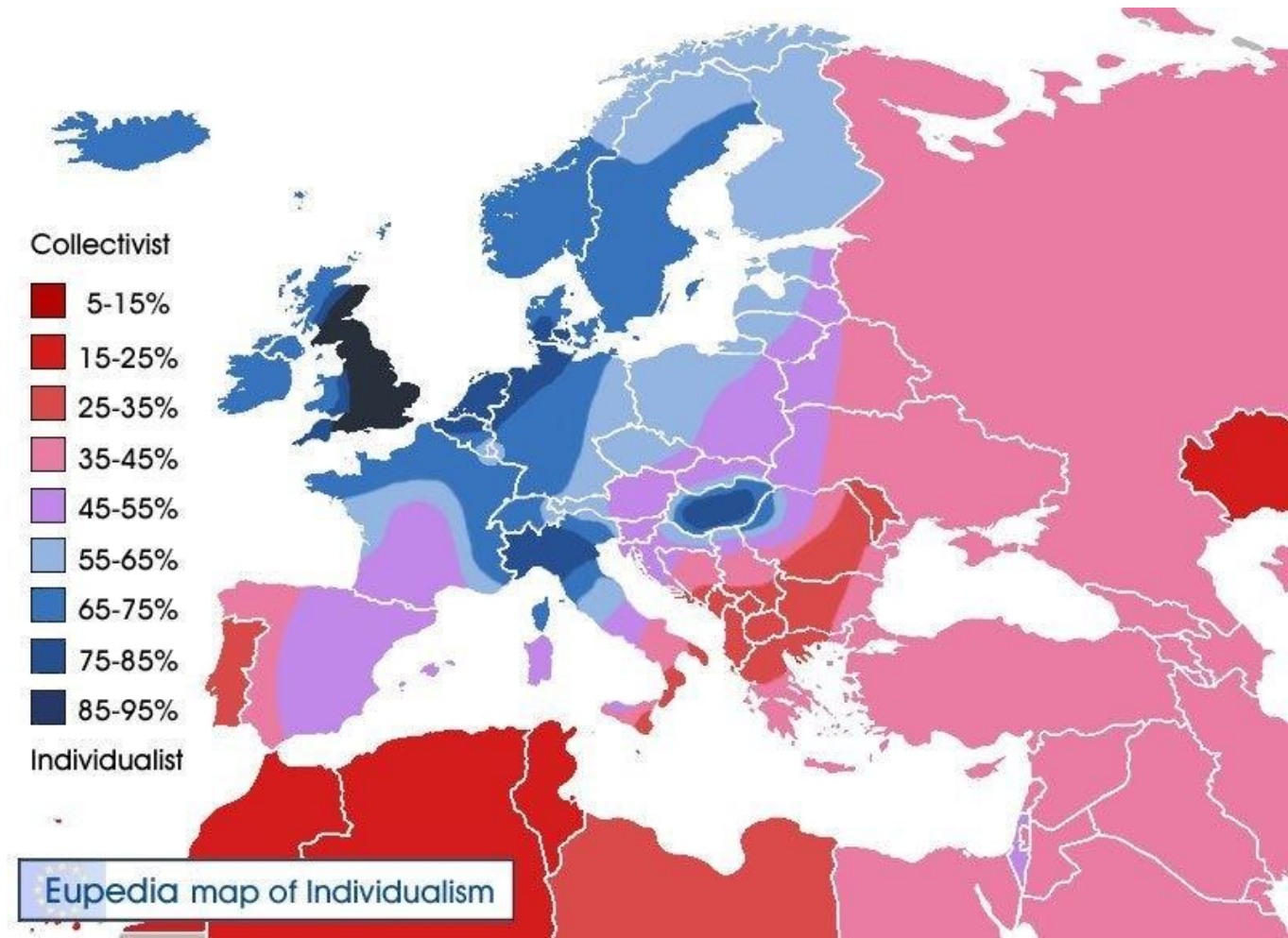
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Individualism in Europe

(Hofstede et al., 2010)

- Portugal: 27
- Bulgaria: 30
- Slovakia: 52
- Denmark: 74
- The Netherlands: 80
- United Kingdom: 89

Collectivist

- 5-15%
- 15-25%
- 25-35%
- 35-45%
- 45-55%
- 55-65%
- 65-75%
- 75-85%
- 85-95%

Individualist

Eupedia map of Individualism

BRITAIN HAS BEEN VOTED THE LONELINESS CAPITAL OF EUROPE - SO HOW DID WE BECOME SO ISOLATED?

Not only can loneliness lead to mental-health issues but studies proved that it can also be more dangerous than obesity and smoking

Gillian Orr • Thursday 03 July 2014 00:00 • Comments

"How often did you feel lonely in the past week?" (in %)

	Most, almost all, or all of the time (%)	Some of the time (%)	Number of participants
Poland	11,7	14,5	1597,5
Czechia	11,3	29,5	2125,8
Hungary	11	26,8	1696,4
Portugal	9,8	25	1264,1
France	9,6	24	1916,8
Spain	8,5	22,4	1922,3
Lithuania	7,8	36,9	2212,3
Estonia	7,3	25,8	2040,4
Belgium	6,6	19,7	1768,2
Austria	6,2	20,6	1786,3
Slovenia	6	19,2	1216,9
United Kingdom	5	20	2251,5
Sweden	4,9	22,8	1789,9
Ireland	4,6	23,7	2375,4
Germany	4	18,2	3038,3
Norway	3,7	18,1	1433,6
Switzerland	3,7	17,5	1530,9
Denmark	3,4	15,3	1497,1
Finland	3,1	16	2083,4
Netherlands	2,7	15,6	1918,5

Why do people in more collectivistic cultures not seem to be protected from loneliness?

Does loneliness *mean* the same across cultures?

(Heu, Hansen, et al., 2021)

- subjective

- feeling of **impaired relation** between the self and outside world

  - feeling closed off from others (not feeling understood, feeling rejected)
  - shortcomings in relationships (e.g., lacking closeness or love, support, …)
  - (perceived) isolation (including separations from loved ones)

(Heu et al., 2021)

Many different reasons for feeling lonely

Some examples:

- Relationship dissatisfaction
- Disagreements
- Being rejected
- Separations / loss
- Difficulty being alone
- Aimlessness
- Problem / decision / event

remedies

ON STAYING POSITIVE

"I'd say: Don't feel like that, we all will be there with you.", says one Indian interviewee in this clip – in which people from very different countries advise to stay positive even if we feel lonely. The loneliness too shall pass. And this thought may make the loneliness at least feel less bad.

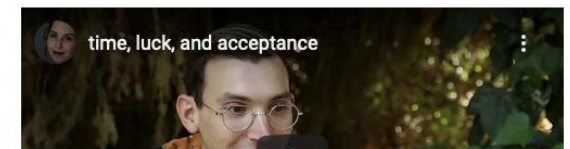**Time, luck and acceptance | Experience with loneliness**

TIME, LUCK, AND ACCEPTANCE

We can meet up with people, get more comfortable with solitude, become happy singles, talk about our loneliness to friends etc. etc. etc. and still not get rid of our loneliness.

loneliness-across-cultures.com

Individualism

Collectivism

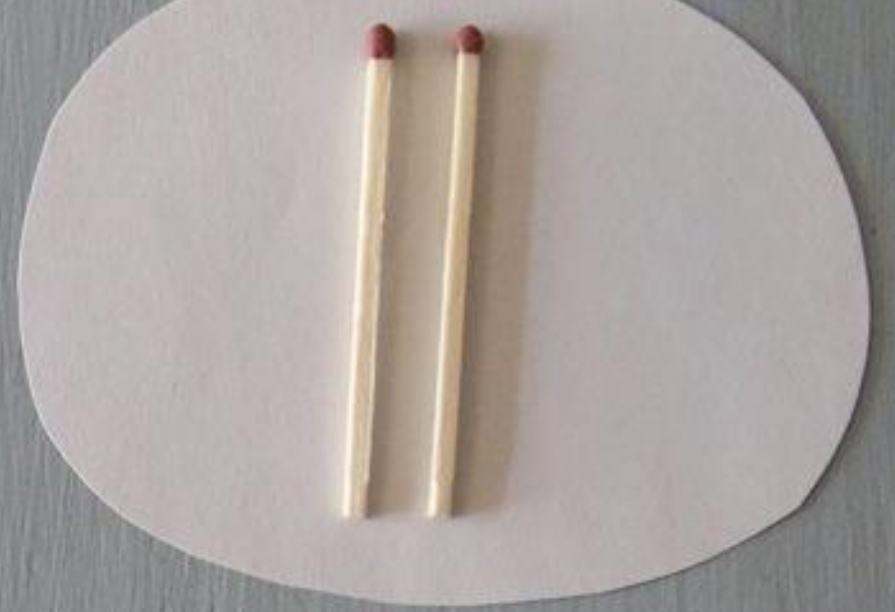more, stricter, more demanding norms to regulate
social relationships

more solitude,
more social
isolation

less individual
freedom to
choose
relationships
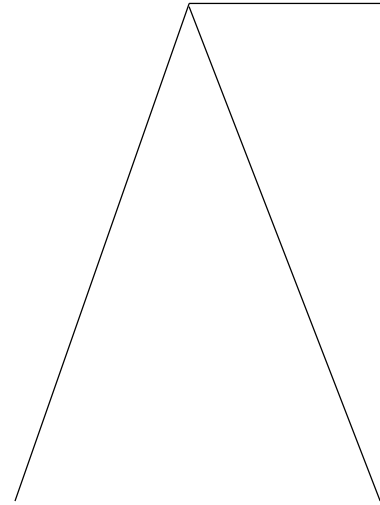
(Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen,
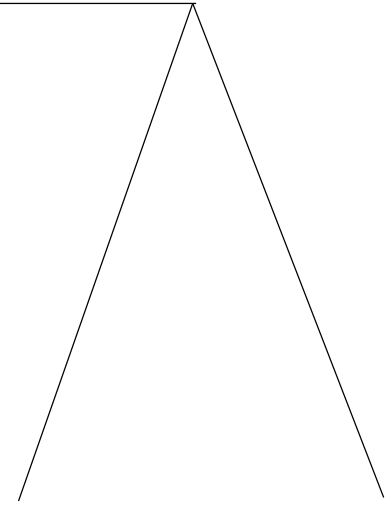2020)

Stricter norms about relationships can increase …

… emotional isolation

… risk of norm deviation

Individualism

Collectivism

solitude
social isolation

emotional isolation
norm deviations

higher sensitivity
(e.g., Lykes & Kemmelmeier,
2014)

What can we **conclude**?

- Loneliness **NOT only** relevant in individualistic societies
- **Broad causes** for loneliness seem **similar** across different cultures

BUT:
- Causes for loneliness may be differently distributed (i.e., different **prevalence**)
- Causes for loneliness may **manifest** themselves in **different situations** (i.e., they may 'look different' in practice)

What is **needed**?

- What are **most prevalent causes** for loneliness in social group (defined by country, region, age, SES, …)?

- **Culture-sensitive measures** (Hansen & Heu, 2021)
  - Qualitative research (i.e., use participants' language)
  - Collaborations with local partners

- Rather than one-size-fits-all interventions → **interventions** against most relevant loneliness **causes**

Thank you