

Loneliness across cultures

A photograph of a crowded street in India, likely a market area. The street is filled with people walking in various directions. On the left, a man in a green polo shirt is walking towards the camera. In the center, a woman in a white sari is walking. To the right, a man in a red and white checkered shirt is walking away from the camera. The background is filled with colorful buildings and many shops, some with signs in English and others in Hindi. A white scooter is parked on the right side of the street. The overall atmosphere is busy and vibrant.

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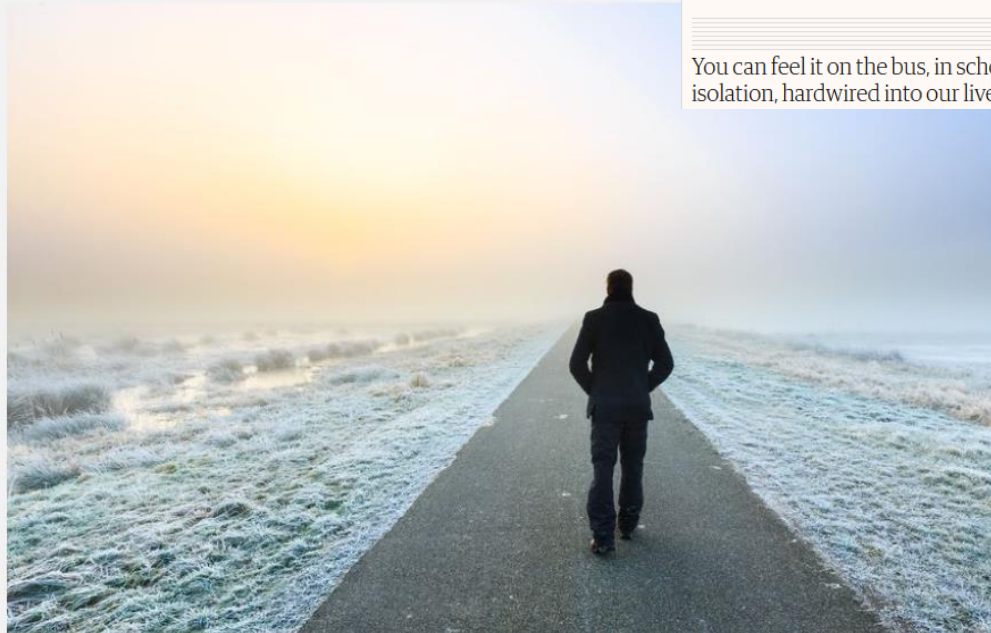
Why You Feel So Lonely

From Tribalism to Individualism

Get the Friends You Want
by Paul Sanders



Does Individualism Make You Lonely



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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
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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)

The “Cultural Paradox of Loneliness”

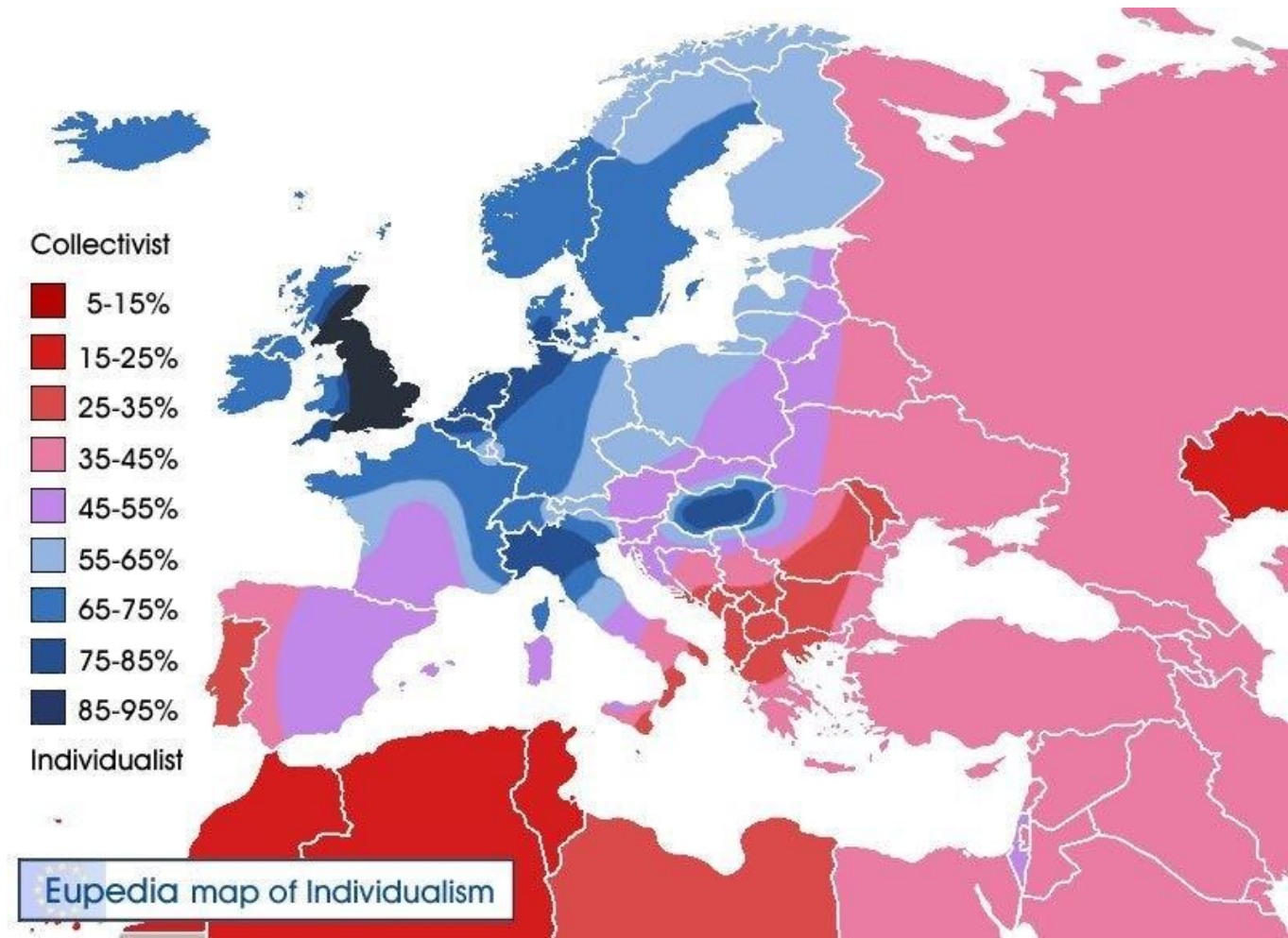
People in collectivistic societies do not seem to feel less lonely than people in individualistic societies

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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





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 %)

Source: European Social Survey data – Wave 6 (2014). <http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no/webview/> (Post-stratification weight including design weight applied)

	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

A group of people are gathered in a room, possibly for a religious or cultural event. In the foreground, several people are seated, their backs to the camera. They are wearing traditional Indian attire, including sarees and a kurta. In the background, a man in a green shirt is playing a harmonium. To the left, a woman is playing a veena. The room has a religious altar in the background with a painting of deities and a small statue. The text "Why do people in more collectivistic cultures not seem to be protected from loneliness?" is overlaid on the image.

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





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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

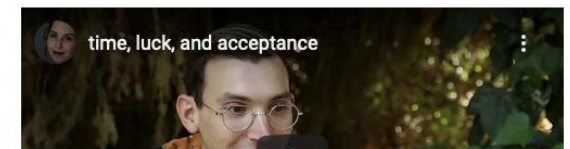


and again reached a good level, worked in another few companies and now, I am on a good path.

loneliness-across-cultures.com

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.



Individualism

Collectivism

more, stricter, more demanding norms to regulate
social relationships



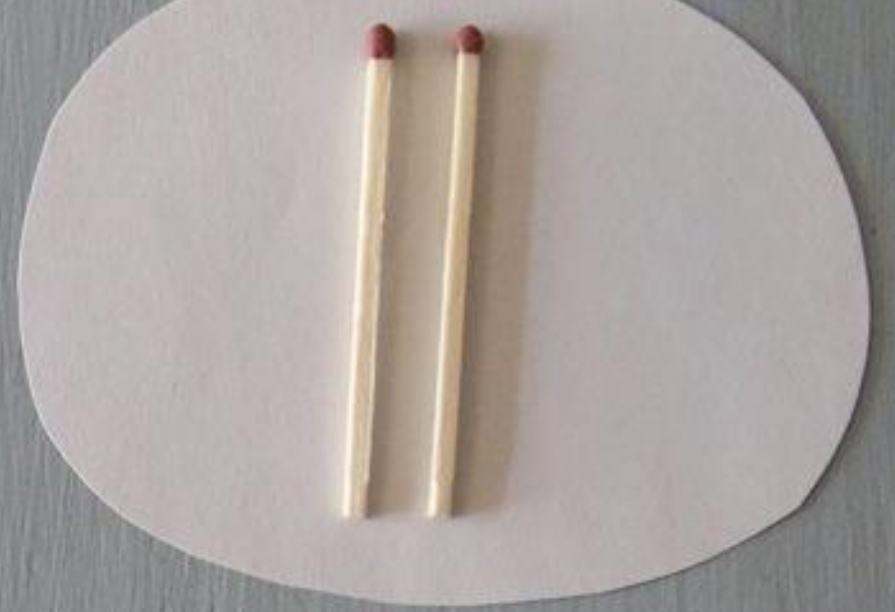
more solitude,
more social
isolation

less individual
freedom to
choose
relationships

(Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen,
2020)

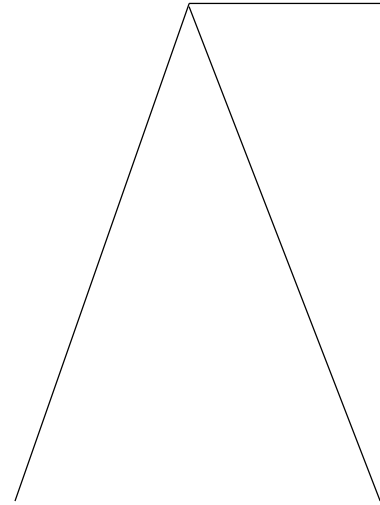


Stricter norms about
relationships can
increase ...



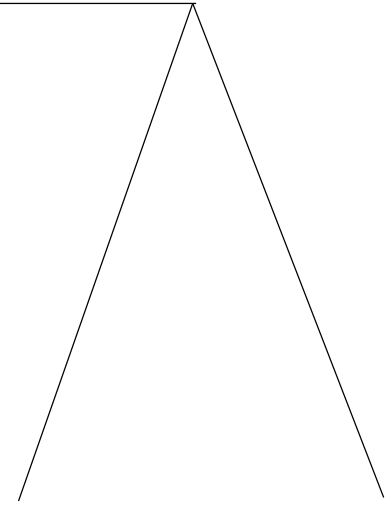
... emotional isolation
... risk of norm deviation

Individualism



solitude
social isolation

Collectivism



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