Conference Paper

Structural and Functional Approach to Study of Psychological Loneliness

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Abstract

The article discusses the possibility of studying the psychological aspects of loneliness in the context of problems of personality adaptation and the risks of adaptive chokes. Loneliness is the result of a low level of adaptation or the result of disadaptation processes. Personality is considered functionally as a means of adaptation primarily to the social environment. The basic components of the personality structure are also considered functionally as tools for adaptation. The socio-psychological version of the personality structure is taken as the basis, which includes social roles, self-concept, and personality orientation in their interrelationship. The experience of loneliness is associated with adaptive dysfunctions of individual components of the personality. The risks that are carried by a social role as a possible factor in the complication of relations or the emergence of acute conflicts with surrounding people and personalities themselves and, as a consequence, the experience of a feeling of loneliness, are considered. Dysfunctions of the self-concept are associated with crises or identity deformation, self-esteem deformation, contradictions, the discrepancy between external, public self, and inner self. Orientation as the main vector of personality activity is considered as an important factor of adaptation, harmonization of relationships with the social world. Difficulties in this area, difficulties in working out a life programme, its correction, or radical changes under the influence of life experience also carry risks of disadaptation and psychological loneliness. For a certain period of time, the purposeful activity of the individual can be blocked, which is a serious psychological problem and a destructive factor of social alienation and self-alienation. Dysfunctions of one of the components of the personality structure will not create radical problems if they are not observed in other components of the personality structure. The greatest risks of social isolation and loneliness are associated with the destabilisation of the structure of the individual as a whole. This leads to a full-scale disorder of the person with the surrounding world and himself/herself, which guarantees disadaptation and intense experiences of loneliness.

Keywords: psychological loneliness, adaptation and disadaptation of personality, socio-psychological structure of personality, social roles, self-concept, personality orientation, dysfunctions in personality structure.

1. Introduction

The problem of psychological loneliness is becoming one of the acute problems of modern Russian society. In the West, the urgency of the problem manifested itself in the second half of the twentieth century. Loneliness has become not only a psychological problem but also a social problem. It is difficult to solve it exclusively by methods of psychological counselling or psychotherapy. The United Kingdom has already established a ministry of loneliness and it is expected to be solidly funded. The advisability of creating a similar ministry in Russia is being discussed in the Federation Council. The difficulty of studying the phenomenon of loneliness is that it is *loneliness among people*. It is paradoxical but inhabitants of megacities first and foremost suffer from loneliness. The results of the research show that an intense experience of loneliness has a destructive effect on a person, his mental and physical health, and immune system suffers as well. Acute affective reactions to loneliness are associated with the risks of depressive states and suicidal behaviour. The inclusion of metropolitans in a rather complex communication network does not save them from psychological loneliness and often exacerbates this kind of experience. In this regard, loneliness cannot be reduced to physical or social isolation. In this case, the problem of loneliness would have more understandable and simple solutions. At the same time, it is impossible to dramatize this problem as fundamentally insoluble. I. Yalom emphasising interpersonal, intrapersonal and existential isolation explains: 'Individuals are often isolated from others or from parts of themselves but at the heart of these separations an even deeper situation associated with the very existence lies, i.e. the isolation that persists in the most satisfactory communication with other individuals, with excellent knowledge of themselves and integration. Existential isolation is associated with a gap between themselves and others over which there are no bridges. It also denotes an even more fundamental isolation, and it is the separation between the individual and the world' [14, *400*]. This is a rather rare experience and, perhaps, an experience 'not for everyone'. At the same time, V.Levi observes that loneliness is 'a givenness of every single entity, every individual: to become lonely, it is enough to be born [7, 14]. Loneliness begins with the moment when we begin to fear loneliness' [7, 42]. Our subjective world, self-consciousness, our self are the most important factors and the results of the development of personality, but at the same time separate us from other people creating barriers to full mutual understanding. The problem of intersubjectivity does exist. Moreover, from the practical point of view, it is important to highlight the following trend: loneliness is associated with an increase in the perception of

your personality, individuality, subjectivity. To some extent, by loneliness, we pay for progress in our individual and personal development.

Loneliness occurs when an individual perceives the discrepancy between two factors: the desired and the achieved level of one's own social contacts. It is a subjective state of emotional alienation from the world, the society and oneself, the perception of existing relationships as unsatisfactory and sophomoric. In this case, a person who has a seemingly developed network of communication can feel lonely. The interpretation of the phenomenon of loneliness and its causes largely depends on the methods of research.

2. Methods

The description of the existing approaches, methods of studying loneliness is given in a number of sources. L. Peplau, D. Perlman, taking into account the nature of research methods, understanding the nature of loneliness, the reasons for the formation identified several approaches to its study. These are psychodynamic, phenomenological, existential, sociological, interacting, cognitive, intimate and systemic approaches [13, 1-18].

In the context of the indicated methodological guidelines, there is a study of loneliness in the domestic literature. Loneliness and its cause, diagnosis, phenomenology, age, and gender specificity were investigated in the works of S.G. Korchagina [2005, 2008], O. M. Krasnikova [2015], N. E. Pokrovsky, [2008], Zh. V. Puzanova [9, 132-154], S.L. Verbitskaya [6, 21-26] and others [1,6-7,15].

At the same time, *the possibilities of studying the psychology of loneliness in the context of problems of adaptation and disadaptation of the individual and the possibilities of a structural and functional approach are not sufficiently used*. Disadaptation can have many consequences for a person, but one way or another it often creates a situation of acute discord between the person and the surrounding world, that is, loneliness.

The actualisation of the problem of loneliness is connected with the complicated ways of human interaction with the social environment. Loneliness can be interpreted as a pronounced feedback signal about problems with adaptation, dysfunctions of a person's vital activity in a social environment. [12, 166-179]. This situation is experienced by the individual and, potentially, stimulates him/her to some changes in order to enter the zone of comfortable interaction with the environment. C.L. Verbitskaya at the same time treats loneliness as "a mental state that activates the emotional

experience of the interaction of the individual and the life situation and regulates the degree of his/her external and internal activity" [6, p. 25].

It is difficult to change the environment, more often one has to change oneself. In this regard, the experience of loneliness can act as a complex, potentially adaptive response if positive personal changes occur. Paradoxically, loneliness itself can perform the function of increasing the level of adaptation.

Socio-psychological adaptation is a means of adaptation, harmonisation of the interaction of the individual with the environment. A person not only adapts, but acts as an active subject, interacts with the environment in accordance with their needs, motives, and interests.

A.A. Rean emphasizes internal and external adaptation criteria. The internal criterion includes psycho-emotional stability, personal conformance, a state of satisfaction, the absence of distress, feeling threatened and a state of emotional and mental tension. An external criterion presupposes the correspondence of a person's real behaviour to the attitudes of society, the requirement of the environment, the rules accepted in the society, the criteria for normative behaviour. In view of these criteria, four levels of adaptation are appropriately distinguished: high excess, high optimal, low, disadaptive [10, 78-80]. Loneliness is associated with low and disadaptive levels of adaptation. In turn, depending on the experience of these levels loneliness will differ in duration and (or) intensity.

The study of loneliness in the context of adaptation problems can go in different directions. One can associate loneliness with insufficient adaptive potential, characteristics of such a functionally dynamic formation as an adaptation barrier, with the breakthrough of which there is an intensification of maladaptive processes, low stress-resistance. At the same time, the reasons for loneliness as a consequence of a low level of adaptation or disadaptation can be described in more detail in the framework of the structural and functional approach. Personality, in this case, acts as a kind of psychological means providing adaptation on the whole life path of a person. Personality as an adaptation tool can realise this most important function due to the effective functioning of its most important content elements. The basic components of the personality structure themselves are formed in connection with the need for effective interaction primarily with the social environment. Depending on how successful a person is, its main components will perform the function of adaptation and largely depend on whether a person will have a feeling of loneliness or not.

3. Analysis

Hence, a difficult task arises: which version of the personality structure will be more effective for studying loneliness as a result of an insufficient adaptation of the individual to the social environment. In other words, how best to describe the structural-functional version of the sources of loneliness. A certain potential for investigating the structural and functional sources of loneliness is provided by any version of the personality structure, for example, a psychoanalytic version. At the same time, loneliness is primarily a socio-psychological phenomenon. Its understanding is connected with the influence of social stimuli on the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of the individual. It is logical that the social and psychological version of the personality structure should be taken as a basis. In this case, the main content elements of the psyche allow you to explore the important aspects of human interaction with the surrounding social world and what happens in the inner psychological space of the individual. And then the psychological structure of the personality is a certain response of the individual to the demands of the social environment and, to some extent, to the need for self-actualization.

There are various versions of the description of the socio-psychological structure of the individual [11, 185-193]. It is important that the structure should fix really significant components of personality, should lean on important results of personality research in social psychology and, most importantly, should work and help both in explaining the available factual material and in finding new directions for studying the problem. The key issue in this respect is to determine to which basic content elements the developed socio-psychological theories of personality are related. If a whole theory of personality is built on the basis of a component, then it really is significant, and it is unable to do otherwise than help in the study of loneliness. The role theory, the concept of the "mirror I", symbolic interactionism, the reference group, the social attitude, the disposition theory of the personality are examples of well-known theories in social psychology. Assuming what these theories are built around, the socio-psychological structure of the personality can be represented in the form of the following main components:

- social roles of the individual;

- "I" is the concept of personality;

- personality orientation (life plans, dispositions, social attitudes).

Furthermore, an analysis of the understanding of the causes of loneliness can be conducted based on individual components, and, in terms of their connection, influence on each other and the state of the personal structure as a whole. If we return to the statement that loneliness is the discord of a person with the surrounding world and with oneself, then one should look at this situation taking into account the designated personality structure as a specific tool for analysing the problem.

Let us turn to the first component of the personality structure. One can speak about several risks that the social role carries as a possible factor of the complication of relations or the emergence of acute conflicts with the surrounding people and themselves and, as a consequence, the experience of a feeling of loneliness:

- how the role is presented on the psychological level. These can be problems in the chain: waiting for the role - understanding the role - learning the role - performing the role;

- cross-role and intra-role conflicts acquire an acute character;

- loss of a subjectively significant role (divorce or loss of close people, dismissal from work);

- the conflict between the role performed and the self-concept. A person cannot express themselves in the proposed roles, s/he has not found himself/herself or s/he is not engaged in their own business. A role or roles are the source of self-alienation.

If the given component of personality ceases to function normally (dysfunction is observed), a person does not cope with roles, or roles conflict with the self-concept or direction of the person and risks of alienation from the society (microenvironment) and self-alienation occur.

A stable I-concept combined with acceptance of one's own personality is an important factor of psychological stability and the absence of a problem of experiencing a feeling of loneliness. The risks of an acute experience of alienation and loneliness in connection with this component of the personality structure are quite diverse. Here are some of them:

- identity crisis. It is an issue of quite intensive changes in self-consciousness or self-concept. According to E. Erikson, this is primarily a problem of teenage and adolescence age. At the same time, this crisis can occur at any stage of a person's life path after some dramatic events in their biography when they have to research for answers to the question "Who am I?". Sometimes this process takes the form of ego-stress;

- deformation of identity. It can relate to different levels of identity: generic, group, personal. This topic is important in many cases. An example is the description of the deformation of the identity of the terrorist who usually has a poorly expressed clan identity (hence the well-known saying "these are nonhumans" comes) and group identity is hypertrophied. The threat of loss of group identity in conditions of its hypertrophy conceals a threat of the feeling of the senselessness of existence, loss of life, the coldness of loneliness, death in life. In conditions of such deformation of identity, a person is ready to go to extreme deeds because any other choice is more painful for them;

- I-concept includes such components as I-image and self-esteem. The connection between self-esteem and psychological loneliness is well known. The low self-esteem prevents a person from establishing normal relationships with surrounding people and leads to inner psychological self-alienation. In this case, it is important to find out which exactly I-image the deformation of self-esteem is connected with. The system of basic I-images usually includes the physical "I", the sexual "I", the family "I", the social "I", the psychological "I", the conflict resolving "I".

Dysfunctions in the self-concept, associated with the crisis periods of development in ontogenesis or the destructive influence of some life circumstances, contribute to the intrapersonal conflicts generation. The weak self is the source of many social and psychological problems of the individual. It, as a rule, actualizes the risks of self-alienation and loneliness.

The personality orientation is connected with the activity, which is the vector of its activity. If a person has developed a realistic, suitable life programme which is associated with a certain set of constructive social attitudes, both to them and to external social objects, then it is an important factor in the socio-psychological stability of the individual. However, it is known that quite often a person has many difficulties in this area. It is difficult to work out a life programme, it has to be adjusted or sometimes drastically revised under the influence of personal development, life experience or external factors. There may be a lack of intelligible notions about it. It is about the dysfunctions of the personality. For a period of time, the purposeful activity of the individual has been blocked, which is a serious psychological problem and a destructive factor of social alienation and self-alienation. As a rule, this is a period of excessive conflict with the surrounding world and oneself.

Dysfunctions in any component of the personality structure give rise to the risks of experiencing loneliness of a greater or lesser degree of duration and intensity.

However, whether the risk is realized, and how serious the problem of experiencing the loneliness as a feeling of isolation, alienation, and the lack of demand will depend on one more important circumstance, namely on the general destabilization of the personality structure. The fact is that the dysfunction of one of the components of the personality structure cannot create cardinal problems if in the other components dysfunction is not observed. For example, a person who experienced a divorce or lost a job (role dysfunction) but s/he did not lose faith in themselves and knows how to keep living or how to act in this situation. In this case, other components of the personality structure continue to function normally and contribute to the socio-psychological stabilization and adaptation of the individual. The grounds for serious disagreement with the world around do not arise in this case. Unfortunately, psychologically the situation develops differently enough. Divorce or loss of work (another significant role) is a strong blow to self-esteem and a person is confused and does not know what to do in this situation. A destabilization of the personality structure as a whole is evident, a full-scale disagreement with the surrounding world and with oneself, which guarantees disadaptation and intense loneliness experiences.

4. Results

Thus, with the complication of social reality, adaptation processes are more complex, the risks of a low level of adaptation or disadaptation increase. This is one of the reasons for the actualization of the problem of psychological loneliness in the most developed countries and among the inhabitants of large megacities. To analyse this aspect of the problem of psychological loneliness, a person can be viewed functionally as a means of adapting a person to a social environment. Functional adaptability of the personality can be considered in more detail in connection with the psychological structure of the individual. Any version of the structural characteristics of the personality provides an opportunity for the analysis of the problem. At the same time, since loneliness is a social and psychological problem by nature, it is most fruitful to use the socio-psychological version of the personality structure to understand the structural and functional sources of loneliness. In this case, psychological loneliness acts interactively as a result of the interaction of the social environment and the personality. But above all, this is the result of personality dysfunctions as a means of adaptation. These dysfunctions can be more thoroughly studied with the identification of such components of the personality structure as social roles, the self-concept of the personality and the direction of its activity. An analysis of the risks of dysfunction,

alienation from the social environment and the feeling of loneliness can be conducted for each identified component of the personality structure and the degree of destabilisation, the disintegration of the structure of the individual as a whole.

5. Conclusions

The study of loneliness in the context of adaptation problems and within the framework of the structural and functional approach can help:

1. To better understand the reasons for the aggravation of the problem of psychological loneliness in connection with the complication of adaptation processes.

2. To clarify which socio-psychological characteristics of the individual cause high risks of collision with intense feelings of loneliness.

3. It allows expanding the traditional set of approaches to an empirical study of loneliness as well, where it is more often associated with communicative problems and a rather limited set of personality correlations.

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