

# Loneliness in the City: Social Networks and Their Applications

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## Abstract

*Loneliness is one of the significant and negative impacts of modern life and is a result of large and abrupt structural changes in social organization. While loneliness can be analyzed as an individual and as a social problem, this presentation focuses on the social context of understanding loneliness. In particular, it refers to loneliness in the city since cities concentrate a larger number of the population, are considered impersonal and can lead to alienation and as such to loneliness. Nevertheless, the argument of alienation, although powerful, is not absolute. The city can become a carrier of social integration of people just because of its size. The central argument of the presentation is that the city as a geographical and social area creates and maintains social networks that help reduce loneliness. Using a critical approach without conclusive arguments, this paper analyzes this position further and explores its application to various population groups.*

**Key words:** City, Community, Loneliness, Physical Space, Social Networks, Social Space

## Introduction: The Study of Loneliness, the Study of the City

Loneliness is a situation that concerns us more and more. This maybe because of fear. Since this work here focuses on the social dimensions of the phenomenon, we must observe that loneliness is a phenomenon that occurs more in the most complex post-industrial societies. Consequently, the concentration of impersonal large numbers of population in the cities could be considered as a source of loneliness due to the growing alienation that generally characterizes post-industrial societies. Clearly alienation plays an important role in the overall explana-

tion of loneliness. However, this work focuses on another explanatory level: the interaction between the members of a social group. Understanding this interaction, or the lack of it, can help us understand loneliness in an objective manner. I am not referring to the feelings of the population of a city. I am referring to what people do: where they go, with whom they socialize, how they move around, with what activities they are involved.

Loneliness as a social phenomenon is not experienced in the same way by all and does not have the same consequences. This simply means that the understanding of this issue should better include the social context within which people live. So the paper starts with a general approach to describe the city. Then, it connects the two main concepts: city and loneliness. Following, it attempts to understand the city as a physical / geographical space and as social space. The central argument and the final conclusion of this study is that the city as a geographical and social space can create and maintain social networks that contribute to the reduction of loneliness.

## Loneliness and City: Negatives and Stereotypes

In our collective consciousness, the city is generally described in rather gloomy colors. The negative stereotype includes a huge area in a chaotic environment where the individual is lost without support, experiencing debilitating loneliness. This, of course, is due to the fact that in the city there are higher levels of alienation which create and reproduce these negative patterns. The stereotypical distinction between city and non-city contributes to the reproduction of the negative image. The constant repetition of this stereotypical separation of the media and their confirmation through sayings such as "I will go to my village to rest and to find myself," lead to the demonization of the city. The initial considerations of the city in the early 20th century have greatly contributed to this image. The city had been described as hostile to the creation of community in connection to three characteristics: size, population density and

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diversity (Wirth, 1938). The opposite of city and stereotypically the place which is not city is represented by the village. To describe this environment an idealized approach is generally used. The standard description is as follows: in the village there are close links between residents, there are social networks of mutual support, there is a neighborhood and all this leads to a feeling of community. The expected connotation is that the village is something positive while the city encapsulates all the negatives for the creation of social networks and the creation of community.

This two-tiered approach, good village – bad city, is an extreme oversimplification of reality and does not help the actual understanding and explanation of the issue of loneliness. Additionally, it does not help to explain the complexity of the city's social environment.

### **Community in the City**

This results in the need to explain the character of the city as a social environment, without the use of reductive and simplistic categories.

To understand the character of the city, we need to study the mechanism of creation of social networks. Social networks are directly related to what we call community. The fact is that from the beginning of the engagement of the social sciences with the study of cities, it became clear that the city is not only a collection of different buildings and infrastructure that take up space. This is a very limited and one-sided approach. The city is much more than that. The city is inhabited by people with different characteristics, priorities and profiles. So, early on there was great emphasis on the study and understanding of the community.

The ideas of a leader of the Chicago School, Robert Park, determined the progress of urban sociology. Park argues that human values and attitudes determine and are determined by the natural environment of a city (Park, 1925).

Consequently, two dimensions for study are raised: the physical / geographical status of community and cultural status of the community. However, because the term 'community' is so elusive and difficult to define, it is replaced by the term "space". Space is something dynamic and at the same time crucial for a group of people. Space, however, is not something one-dimensional. Instead, it is important in both its forms: the physical space and social space.

### **Physical Space**

Most often, when we talk about "community", what comes to mind is a geographical location, generally small in size. Because of its small size, it supports direct relationships between residents and also the creation of community and important social networks. This is the central argument of Herbert Gans, one of the most important scholars of Urban Sociology. Gans focuses on the characteristic of the diversity of the city. In his classic work "Urbanism and Suburbanism as Ways of Life," he describes the city as an interesting urban mosaic. For him, the city is a collection of different neighborhoods that provide a sense of common identity among residents. Thus, Gans introduces the "neighborhood study." In other words, that there is community in the city at the neighborhood level, defined by specific area and physical space (Gans, 1962).

Furthermore, Gans conducted field study in Boston and, through this research, explained the social organization and social networks in the city through the use of an extremely apt neologism: urban villagers. These groups, with similar national and cultural characteristics, live in the same geographical area and this helps to confirm and maintain their cultural identity (Gans, 1983).

Essentially, the conclusion here, with support from Gans, is that there is community and social networks in the city. Examples of this kind of community is the neighborhood playground, a park, a parish, the local school yard, or the open square.

### **Social Space**

Apart from the physical space, there is also social space. This space is often taken for granted but it is equally important or more important than physical space. The argument is that people with common interests in the city coexist based on certain social and cultural characteristics, regardless of their geographic proximity. In other words, the complexity of urban space provides the conditions for creating community through strong cultural networks.

One of the main representatives of this view is Claude Fischer, who explained the city life through the creation of sub-groups of common interests. In his work "The Urban Experience," he notes that cities are driving the development of these various sub-groups. Examples could be an ethnic group, a group of students, artists, members of various athletic

teams, the members of a cultural or scientific association (Fischer, 1976).

City life supports all sorts of different interests, since the city due to its size, is more likely to attract a larger number of people who share the same interests. Additionally, some of these groups take actions that benefit others in the city, such as, for example, charities. The important point of this view is to consider the city as a mosaic of different size groups that their members co-exist as a community and through their actions social networks arise.

### **Physical and Social Space and Loneliness**

The two kinds of space presented above have many practical applications. On closer reading it becomes obvious that there are not separate from each other and eventually coexist in a continuous interaction relationship. For example, neighborhoods with a high number of people with different cultural habits are characterized by small physical space, but extremely large social space. In contrast, members of the international jet set have little social space (they are very similar in opinions and attitudes) and have very wide physical space (through continuous movements)

Therefore, the challenge is to combine the two types of space and to approach the issue of loneliness critically. This means that even a simple observation shows that city life cannot be described either with completely dark colors or with a completely positive way. The city is a living organism that affects and is affected by its inhabitants. Therefore, we must understand that the people themselves are active elements in defining their social life in an urban environment. They are not, in other words, passive recipients of other external factors.

One way to understand the previous argument is to identify the various social networks that people create and become members of. These networks are what ultimately determines the existence of the community. Network analysis is based on the idea of Georg Simmel of "social circles" (Simmel, 1950). Simmel was the first one to point out that people belong to a variety of social groups which do not necessarily coincide. Therefore, people interact differ-

ently with each other depending on the particular social circle. Example is someone who describes himself as chess player, athlete, husband, friend, member of an extended family, and pianist. All these roles are carried out differently and in a different place and time in each of the groups / circles. As such, the idea of social circles can be used to study the formation of community.

In practice, the vast majority of residents belong to a social network, combining both physical and social space. A detailed research on this subject conducted by Barry Wellman, found that city dwellers are not solitary individuals (Wellman, 1988). Research shows that only 2% of a representative sample of respondents was not able to include at least one person with whom they have frequent contact and close relationship. These findings relate directly to the social space. Moreover, Wellman found that only 13% of all close contacts lived in the same neighborhood with respondents. This is related to physical space and indicates that geographical proximity (physical space) is not necessary for the existence of community and social networks. This provides a more complete picture of the lives of city residents regarding loneliness, taking into account both natural and social space.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as a result of all the above, it can be argued that the city environment is not prohibitive for the creation of community and a sense of "belonging". By extension, the existence of the city itself does not create isolation and loneliness. Increasingly growing evidence supports that there are social networks in cities that support the creation of community of various population groups. This creation of community, however, should not be taken for granted and it is not the same everywhere. For this reason it is proposed to abstain from general aphorisms on this issue. The city is a large and complex entity that requires study and understanding as a geographic mosaic but also as a cultural mosaic. The logical consequence of this is that the reasons that could lead to the creation of community are radically different from one city to another.

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