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Socioeconomic Status's Impact on the Experience of Loneliness

Sociology and Anthropology 496: Independent Research
University of Puget Sound
Professor Ben Lewin
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Introduction:

There has been a considerable amount of research about loneliness, yet much of the research is inconclusive and some is even contradictory (Agnew 1980, Andersson 1998, Benner and Wang 2014, Berkman and Glass 2000, Borys and Perlman 1985, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Hawkey et al. 2008, Hughes et al. 2004, Kawachi and Berkman 2000, Kearns et al. 2015, Putnam 2002). The connotation associated with loneliness is negative but beyond that the interpretation takes many different shapes and meanings for people: being physically alone or isolated, perceiving a lack of support, lacking financial assistance, an emotional solace, discerning a lack of belonging in a community, or believing they are misunderstood (Kearns et al. 2015). The subjective nature of loneliness makes it a difficult variable to measure. This has led to the research behind the experience of loneliness to be contested, muddled, and even, at times, opposed.

The most concrete understanding of loneliness have come out of the field of gerontology (Hawkey et al. 2008). These studies display substantial evidence that once people reach a certain age they are more likely to experience loneliness (Hawkey et al. 2008, de Jong Gierveld et al. 2006, Jones et al. 1981). Elderly populations are at high risk of experiencing severe and prolonged loneliness (Hawkey et al. 2008, Lee and Ishii-Kintz 1988). This is often times due to social isolation from lack of mobility, loss of spouse and friends, and increased health issues (Hawkey et al. 2008, Lee and Ishii-Kintz 1988). In addition to aging (Hawkey et al. 2008) and social isolation (Kearns et al. 2015): race (Benner and Wang 2014), mental health (Cacioppo et al. 2009), disability (Jones et al. 1981), and gender (Borys and Perlman 1985) have been studied as independent variables. Within the broad scope of research on loneliness there has been little research on how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness. Other studies, like

those looking at age, use socioeconomic status as a control variable (Hawkley et al. 2008). There is virtually no literature that looks at socioeconomic status as the independent variable. This study will address the gap in literature and research, the complexity of loneliness, and the health implications and consequences associated with prolonged exposure to loneliness. This study will explore why it is important that loneliness is studied, the relationship between socioeconomic status and loneliness, future research that needs to happen in the field of loneliness, and interventions that would aid in the prevention or limiting of unequal exposure to loneliness and lack of support on account of one's socioeconomic status.

Challenges in Studying Loneliness:

Due to the subjective nature of loneliness and the accompanying challenges of measuring feelings and perspectives (Cacioppo et al. 2009, Benner and Wang 2014, Andersson 1998), research on loneliness is often inconclusive and sometimes contradictory (Andersson 1998, Hawkley et al. 2008, Kearns et al. 2015). However, there are certain measures of loneliness that have predictor variables that do sustain clear results. Loneliness studies in the field of gerontology showcase an indisputable relationship that growing old increases one's vulnerability to the experience of loneliness (Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987, Hawkley et al. 2008). Lee and Ishii Kuntz (1987) and Hawkley et al. (2008) have found that elderly people have a higher risk of experiencing loneliness due to limited mobility resulting in restricted access to social engagements. The capacity to study loneliness in the field of gerontology is more straightforward due to the simplicity and objectivity of the predictor variables: limited mobility and friends and/or spouse passing away (Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987, Hawkley et al. 2008, Andersson 1998).

One example of the complexity that appears when studying loneliness is the results of how gender impacts the experience of loneliness (Hawkley et al. 2008, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Andersson 1998, Benner and Wang 2014, Burke et al. 2010, Borys and Perlman 1985). Researches such as Hawkley et al. (2008) and Cacioppo et al. (2009: 9) have found that women experience more intense feelings of loneliness, while other researchers such as Kearns et al. (2015), Forest and Kearns (2001), and Borys and Perlman (1985) have seen that men are more prone to loneliness. Andersson (1998) briefly touches on gender as a predictor variable, stating that “most studies show that women report loneliness to a higher extent than men, some studies report no differences (267).” One variable that the Andersson (1998) article touches on is that men may be less likely to open up about their experience with loneliness due to ingratiated social norms of how men are expected to express their feelings. One possible discussion is that men experience loneliness at a higher level than women do, but when women are subject to feelings of loneliness the experience is more intense and destructive than it is for men (Borys and Perlman 1985, Jones et al 1981). In conclusion, no-one is entirely sure how gender serves as a predictor variable for the experience of loneliness. These studies (Andersson 1998, Borys and Perlman 1985, Jones et al 1981) have produced contradictory results which exhibits some of the challenges in measuring a subjective and constantly changing variable such as loneliness.

While often conflated, loneliness, isolation, and depression are their own separate states (Andersson 1998: 265, Hawkley et al. 2008: 375). And each of those circumstances are experienced differently depending on other variables. Emotional isolation is an “absence of an attachment figure in one’s life (Andersson 1998: 265)” whereas social isolation is either when one is not in a community that is accepting of them or if they are physically removed from or have minimal forms of social interaction (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Andersson

1998). Emotional isolation is when there isn't someone who is supportive -- this could take the form of emotional or verbal abuse -- while social isolation is when someone is truly physically alone. While social isolation, emotional isolation, and depression are often times associated with the experience of loneliness, they are not always correlated. Being able to isolate and study the subjective feeling of loneliness, and account accurately for depression, poses a methodological and data analysis vexation (Hawkley et al. 2018, Andersson 1998, Kearns et al. 2015, Burke et al. 2010). It is logical for these four states to connect and impact one another, as they often do (Andersson 1998, Jones et al. 1981, Burke et al. 2010). If one is socially or emotionally isolated and lacks a support system or a form of affirmation it is not far-fetched to predict that that person will experience loneliness. Consequently experiencing loneliness is adverse and can be all-consuming which can lead to depression (Hawkley et al. 2018). Social isolation, emotional isolation, depression, and loneliness are deeply intertwined which is another challenge in studying and isolating this variable.

As Andersson (1998) points out the complexity of studying loneliness: "the relationship between the objective manifestation of being alone and the subjective manifestation of experiencing loneliness is fundamental to the understanding of the problem (266)." Someone who lives alone may experience loneliness or they may not, on the other hand someone who is experiencing loneliness may live alone or they may not (Andersson 1998, Gieverld et al. 2006). While there is correlation between the variables and patterns of social and emotional isolation serving as predictor variables for feeling lonely, there are no definitive answers to the relationship between depression, social isolation, emotional isolation, and loneliness. Measuring loneliness as its own variable is difficult and there are no clear methodologies in place to do this. The complex and nebulous research behind the predictor variables to determine who are the most

prone to the experience of loneliness leave not only understanding the relationship between socioeconomic status and loneliness as a point of unmapped research but it also exposes the literature gap in defining loneliness. Loneliness as an entity is subjective and therefore arduous to study.

Types of Loneliness

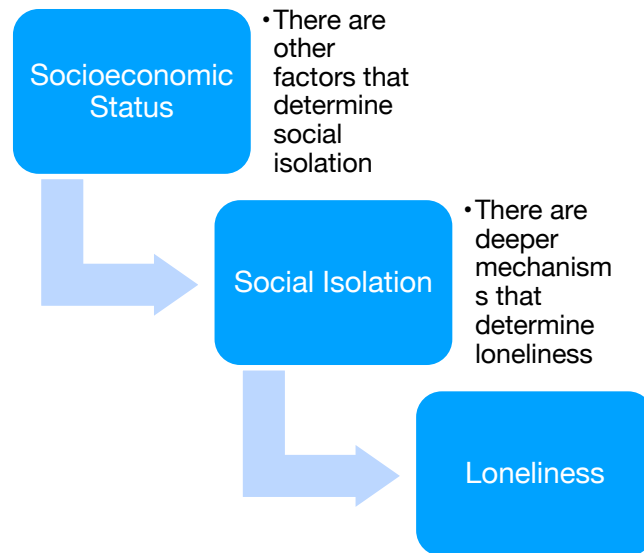
With loneliness being caused by a variety of reasons and the heterogeneity of what it looks like, researchers such as Kearns et al. (2015), Lee and Ishii-Kuntz (1987), Huges et al. (2004), Andersson (1998), and Benner and Wang (2014), have attempted to understand who is most susceptible to it by dividing loneliness by the circumstances people are experiencing during the onset of their loneliness. By focusing in on the circumstances people are in when they feel extreme loneliness it allows researchers to assemble a method in which to study loneliness and control for what causes people to experience it. This section of the paper will outline the most common circumstances that surround people when they experience loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987, Huges et al. 2004, Andersson 1998, Benner and Wange 2014).

State loneliness is about one's immediate feelings of loneliness, this often times follows a traumatic event or hardship and is persistent and challenging to get rid of yet can be easier to process due to the objective nature and self-understanding of what caused these feelings of loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015: 341). *Situational loneliness* is defined as loneliness that has to do with the possibility of contact with others (Kearns et al. 2015: 341). In situational loneliness, loneliness fluctuates depending on when someone is in contact with others: one does not feel lonely when they are in the presence of another but does when they are alone. Situational loneliness is directly correlated to social isolation or emotional isolation: this is more long-term

than state loneliness and has more detrimental health consequences (Gierveld et al. 2006, Kearns et al. 2015). Situational loneliness only occurs if someone is socially isolated or emotionally isolated (Gierveld et al. 2006, Kearns et al. 2015). *Circumstantial loneliness* looks at “who can be relied on” in times of need, and what factors influence a support network (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2009). The factors that influence social support are gender, age, mental health, and/or socioeconomic status (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2009).

Much of the research on the relationship between gender and loneliness was conducted in the late 20th century and does not take into consideration the complexities of 21st century expression of gender and identity. The following example is in place to clarify the definition of circumstantial loneliness, in reality there are multiple ways this situation could express itself. If a woman has been socialized to believe that it is okay to be emotional and emotionally supportive, she is likely to have more friends (Borys and Perlman 1985). Due to the societal message that she should have emotional wisdom she gains friends, these friends are then more likely to support her when her parents die or her kids are sick, and thus she will be less vulnerable to loneliness (Borys et al. 1985). On the other hand, her male counter-part may have received societal messages that he cannot be emotional because it is not “manly,” and therefore he does not have the same extensive support network when his parents die or his children are sick as his female counterpart (Borys et al. 1985). This illustration sheds light on one way in which an independent variable, in this case gender norms, impact one’s experience of loneliness. If someone is elderly and less mobile they will have less of a social network due to lack of ability to go out and make friends or keep up with friends; when they need people to rely on they have a higher chance of being lonely due to their *circumstances* of being elderly and therefore not being able to make or maintain a social network (Berkman and Glass 2000). This literature review and

the primary research that was conducted examined circumstantial loneliness, with socioeconomic status as the predictor or independent variable.



Other key terms that are related to loneliness are anchorage terms, or ways to measure social networks (Andersson 1998: 265). One important thing when measuring social networks is the size/range/extent, which simplified is the number of people in the network (Andersson 1998, Gierveld et al. 2006, Hughes et al. 2004). The other important aspects to look at is density -- the degree to which people know each other, -- reachability/accessibility which is how much one can communicate with the others, and directionality -- “the extent to which relationships are reciprocal (Andersson 1998: 265).” While these aspects of a social network do not determine if someone experiences loneliness — just as social isolation does not necessarily predict loneliness — these characteristics of social networks are important to keep in mind when thinking of social capital and how social capital impacts loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1988, Jones et al. 1981, Kawachi and Berkman 200).

Operationally Defining Loneliness:

Due to the way loneliness in relation to SES is conceptualized this essay will focus on circumstantial loneliness. Circumstantial loneliness examines how the attributes of someone — if they are living in a deprived community, or if they are female, or elderly, or have low or high socioeconomic status — impacts who they can rely on in times of need (Gierveld et al. 2006, Kearns et al. 2015). Loneliness will be defined as the *perception* or *feeling* of lacking a support network especially in times of need. It is important to define loneliness as *perception* because this will account for social isolation as a variable. This essay will not focus on the objective variable of social isolation. Research has shown clear patterns of social isolation being connected to socioeconomic status: people of lower socioeconomic status are more vulnerable to social isolation due to living situations such as living in a neighborhood where it is unsafe to wander, or financial means of getting places are limited, etc... (Andersson 1998, Kearns et al. 2015). This essay focuses on the subjective, and far more difficult to measure, variable of loneliness and how that is impacted by socioeconomic status. This is important because there has been little research or results on how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness. This research looks to narrow the literature gap that shows how socioeconomic status and social isolation are connected and how social isolation and loneliness are connected, and these research looks to link socioeconomic status and loneliness.

Socioeconomic Status, Social Capital, and the Experience of Loneliness:

While there is limited research on how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness, there is existing literature that shows the correlation between socioeconomic status,

social capital, and loneliness (Berkman and Glass 2000, Burke et al. 2010, Jones et al. 1981, Kearns et al. 2015). There is social capital, cultural capital, and financial capital. Social capital is who one knows and what networking opportunities there are. Cultural capital is when people have been taught how to act or respond in a way that gains them status. Financial capital is one's access to money. All three forms of capital intertwine with socioeconomic status and therefore impact the experience of loneliness. Some researchers, such as Agnew (1980) and McDowell et al. (2013), have noted an inconsistency in their research in which interview subjects report that they feel more support -- other than financial support -- than what they suspect people of higher socioeconomic status feel. In one interview, the subject says that lower socioeconomic status family's bond together in order to "get things done to make it work (66)" and because they rely on each other more for emotional support when the world doesn't deem them successful (McDowell et al. 2013: 66). Other inconsistencies in the research appear in the Durkheimian (1897) work studying suicide, where upper class, white Catholic men are more likely to commit suicide and experience anomie or feelings of normlessness (Durkheimian 1897, Agnew 1980, Berkman and Glass 2000). And further in Putnam's (2002) work on bridging versus bonding capital, where people bond together due to important similarities such as ethnicity, age, gender, or social class (11). Many people come together and form a community from bonding capital rather than from bridging capital, while there can be more negative outcomes from bonding capital (such as separating out minorities), many stigmatized groups and minorities do unite in a way that is supported by the theories in bonding capital (Putnam 2002:11). These inconsistencies continue to prove the complex nature of how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness.

The majority of the research, however, pointed toward the conclusion that people of low socioeconomic status are more vulnerable to the experience of loneliness than those of middle or high socioeconomic status. In the Kearns et al. (2015) article, “Loneliness, Social Relations and Health and Well-being in Deprived Communities,” there is a clear connection between being low socioeconomic status and living in a deprived community. A deprived community often lacks sufficient social services, safe and reliable public transportation, and upkeep (Kearns et al. 2015). Those living in deprived communities and neighborhoods reported high levels of loneliness and attributed this with not feeling safe leaving their home unless they absolutely needed to. People reported that the loneliness was due to increased levels of violence, lack of transportation out of the community, and the high residence turn-over rate which made it challenging to make lasting friendships (Kearns et al. 2015). The residents in these communities would not be considered *socially isolated* by the technical definition of the term, however they experienced increased physical barriers to social engagements resulting in increased levels of loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015: 334). Kearns et al. (2015) never specifically uses the word “social capital,” but uses similar ideas and terminology to relate “deprived neighborhoods” and the impact on social connection that happens when one lives there.

Both Kearns et al. (2015) and Cacioppo et al. (2010) explore the connection between the lack of social networks that create a heightened experiences of loneliness. In each study, the two researchers touch on the fact that a lack of social networks can be related to how socioeconomic status forces people to live their life (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010). Both studies argue that it is not necessarily the ‘being alone’ that generates loneliness but instead *lacking people to rely on* that increases the likelihood of loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010). Having people to rely on takes many forms. It is important for people to have friends and

family to rely on for financial support when they need it, to go shopping for them if they are unwell, or simply people to give them advice (Kearns et al. 2015). If someone is living in a deprived neighborhood – due, potentially, to being low socioeconomic status – this increases their chance of having low social capital (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010). In conclusion, while there is virtually no literature *directly* linking socioeconomic status to the experience of loneliness, there is literature that links socioeconomic status and social capital (Benner and Wang 2014, Burke et al. 2010, Portes 1998, Hughes et al. 2004) and literature that links social capital and the experience of loneliness (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010, Ryan et al. 2008, Andersson 1998, de Jon Gierveld et al 2006).

Low social capital can take the form of social isolation due to the lack of networks that is inferred in the definition (Benner and Wang 2014, Burke et al. 2010, Portes 1998, Hughes et al. 2004, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987). If someone is of lower socioeconomic status there is a higher chance that they will live in a deprived neighborhood, because of cheaper housing, which often does not offer the resources for accessing social networks or for transporting to and from family members (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010), which results in a higher risk of experiencing loneliness (Benner and Wang 2014, Burke et al. 2010).

This project has worked off of the research on social isolation (Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2010, Ryan et al. 2008, Andersson 1998, de Jon Gierveld et al 2006, Benner and Wang 2014, Burke et al. 2010, Portes 1998, Hughes et al. 2004) while acknowledging the fact that social isolation and loneliness are different. This research accepts that social isolation is an important and a well-documented contributor to experiencing loneliness. And while the social isolation and loneliness correlation is well established in the literature, this study anticipates that there are deeper mechanisms behind loneliness than social isolation. This research project uses

qualitative methodology to delve deeper into the root of what concepts, methods, and mechanisms connect socioeconomic status to loneliness.

Consequences of Loneliness:

Feeling lonely is a natural and nearly universal emotion, especially one that occurs during times of transitions and times of high stress (Hughes et al. 2004). However extensive exposure to the experience of loneliness has significant mental, physical, and behavioral consequences (Andersson 1998, Kearns et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Benner and Wang 2014, Hawkley et al. 2008, Borys and Perlman 1985). Humans are social animals, prolonged social isolation or perception of non-voluntary seclusion causes health problems both on a biological level as well as behavioral issues (Cacioppo et al. 2009: 11). Studying loneliness is important because the “condition we are studying is so disturbing that we surely have some responsibility to do what we can to be helpful to those who experience it (Andersson 1998: 264).” It is also important that researchers gain an understanding of what variables make people more vulnerable to loneliness in order to work towards an equitable society.

Loneliness is closely linked with depression (Cacioppo et al.: 2, Andersson 1998: 266, Hawkley et al. 2008: 375). Studies show that loneliness predicts depressive symptoms (Cacioppo et al.: 2, Andersson 1998: 266, Hawkley et al. 2008: 375). Prospective studies have shown that loneliness also anticipates declining mental health and cognition, increased nursing home admission, and elevated mortality rates in elder adults (Hawkley et al. 2008: 375, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1988). The experience of loneliness produces a heightened risk for suicide ideation and attempts, alcoholism, and for behaviors that negatively impact physical health such as overeating or under-eating or not exercising. Loneliness uniquely predicts elevated blood

pressure, infrequent contact with friends and family (which creates a negative cycle), dissatisfaction with living circumstances, chronic stress, family conflict, a number of risk factors for heart disease, poor sleep, morning rise in cortisol, and “alterations in gene transcription control pathways that favor heightened inflammation (Hawkley et al. 2008: 375).” These are just some of the health consequences that come from prolonged exposure to extreme loneliness substantiating that loneliness and the variables that cause loneliness are topics that matter to the lives of humans

Methods:

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted using a non-random convenient sampling method to work towards developing a methodology to study the more subjective nature of loneliness. The majority of subjects were interviewed while riding the bus system in a metropolitan area in the United States in an attempt to diversify the socioeconomic status of the people being interviewed. Two people were interviewed in an airport in the same town and three people were interviewed on a small liberal arts campus.

Interview subjects were always first to initiate conversation, following their initiation I would ask the interview subject if they would be willing to be interviewed for the project. I would sit on the bus and wait for someone to start talking to me, when someone would initiate conversation I would chat for a moment and then tell them that I was doing a research project on loneliness and would ask if they would be willing to be interviewed. Many times people said that they did not feel comfortable being interviewed about something so vulnerable by a stranger, however enough people said that they were willing to be interviewed that this project was able to collect a small but valuable sample. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour,

depending on how much information people were willing to share and how much time they had on the bus. All interviews focused on what loneliness meant to people, the different forms it took, how often they felt loneliness, what demographics they believed impacted one's risk of increased vulnerability of experiencing loneliness, how they thought socioeconomic status played a role in experiencing loneliness, and what socioeconomic class they were in.

The goal of the study is to understand how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness, however, due to the lack of formal and agreed upon definition of loneliness, a secondary goal of the study is to understand how people talk about loneliness and how people define and understand loneliness. Most of the pre-existing literature used quantitative research, such as surveys, to collect data, this research project used some of the terminology from those surveys to ask qualitative interview questions (Andersson 1998, Benner and Wang 2014, Berkman and Glass 2000, Cacioppo et al. 2009, de Jong Gieverld et al. 2006, Hawkey et al. 2008). The interviews first asked questions about day-to-day life, who people went to laugh with or to vent to, what people did for fun and to relax, how often they saw friends and family, if they liked the people they worked with. Then the interview moved onto questions about defining loneliness, what loneliness meant to them, and how often they experienced it as well as which socioeconomic status they perceived to be the most vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. In order to determine what socioeconomic class people fell into, participants were asked to classify themselves in regard to which class they believed they were in, they were asked about how much money they made a year (on a scale such as a. less than 30,000 a year b. 30,000 – 45,000 a year, etc...), what education level they had completed, and some family background questions. All interviews were recorded, following completion of the verbal consent form, and notes were taken during the interview. All notes that were taken during the interviews are in a binder which

also contains field notes, transcriptions, and the coding. Within twenty-four hours after the interview, a field note was written up which included my own experience of the interview, other things that were said around the topic that happened before or after the formal interview was over – all things that were said before or after the interview that were relevant to the topic were given direct permission to be used in this study – and any other observations, such as portions of the interview where people seemed uncomfortable or really excited to talk about.

All interviews were transcribed and coded, field notes were also coded. There were two separate coding systems that were used. The first was color coding, which was used to define categories, classify relevant themes that were found throughout the interviews, and to measure how those themes were different depending on socioeconomic status. The second type of coding used was a numerical system to quantify levels of loneliness and determine socioeconomic status. I created this system in order to attempt to calibrate and measure loneliness. Due to the subjective nature of loneliness, getting an accurate measure on the amount of loneliness individuals are experiencing is challenging if not impossible. Using the numerical system to determine an amount of loneliness – such as if someone used the rhetoric that they were “very lonely” they would score 1 – this enabled me to quantify the data. Quantifying the data made it possible to analyze it and understand who was most vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. Although I collected socioeconomic data, I also attempted to look at participants’ life situations from a holistic viewpoint. For the loneliness section, each question was ranked on a scale between 1 and 10. For example if someone said they were *not* lonely *ever* they would get a high score such as a 10 for that question, but if they also said that they did not have a very big support group or did not have a lot of friends then they would get a lower score on that question. Every person was given a number on loneliness, if they scored low but said they were not lonely that

was taken into consideration. The scores are based on how many questions were asked to determine loneliness, there were twenty-one questions in the interviews that determine loneliness. So if someone is very lonely and answered that they were “extremely lonely” to every question they would receive only one point for every question, which would mean that twenty-one questions of receiving only one point would result in them being given the lowest score one could possibly get on the loneliness scale.

Scores between 21-84 are considered very lonely, and within that range there is a scale as well if a person scored below a 30 this study classifies them as extremely lonely. Scores between 84-147 are considered moderately lonely, and scores between 147-189 are considered not very lonely, and while no one scored a 210 based off of this coding system, a 210 would be considered not lonely at all. To determine socioeconomic status, people’s income was considered as well as education level, number of people in their immediate family, total household income, and family money. All names or any identifying information have been changed in the study to preserve anonymity of the subjects.

Quantitative Results:

The subject pool consisted of 20% people of low socioeconomic status, 27% middle socioeconomic status, and 53% higher socioeconomic status. While 47% of people interviewed perceived that higher socioeconomic status people were lonelier, in the context of this study only 25% of people identifying as higher socioeconomic status considered themselves as very lonely. The reason why there is a dissonance between perception and reality is explored later in the essay. Forty percent of people interviewed perceived that lower socioeconomic status would be more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, however 100% of the people interviewed who

qualified as low socioeconomic status said that they felt extremely lonely. Of people who were interviewed who ranked as middle socioeconomic status, 50% of them were lonely. Thirteen percent of people interviewed believed that socioeconomic status didn't matter or impact one's experience of loneliness.

Universal Definitions of Loneliness:

Conducting qualitative research allowed for a greater understanding of people's experiences and offered the ability to gain insight into the deeper mechanisms of loneliness and determine who is most affected by loneliness. One goal of this study was to be able to ascertain where there is a disconnect from objective reality and what people perceive — such as when crime in a neighborhood does prevent people from leaving their home versus the perception that they are all alone. A second goal was to understand how people discussed loneliness and to see if there were patterns in how it was spoken about in order to attempt to define loneliness.

Defining loneliness has been a constant challenge for researchers (Benner and Wang 2014, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1988, McDade 2008, McDowell et al. 2013, Ryan et al. 2002). As shown by the way people described loneliness, there is no clear definition. While this research did not clarify or solidify a definition, this research was able to add to an understanding of *how* people talk about loneliness.

The first interview question asked that directly related to loneliness was: “What does loneliness mean to you?”

Subject 1 responded “This is a hard question.”

Subject 2 responded “Oh that is so hard, umm...”

Subject 4 responded “It’s a hard question.”

Subject 6 responded “There are all sorts of words that are very hard to define.”

Nearly every person took a long pause to think about what loneliness meant to them and many of them responded that it was a hard question to answer. The personal responses to the challenge of defining loneliness are mirrored in the academic literature and lack of agreement of how to define loneliness or what exactly it is (Borys and Perlman 1985, Burke et al. 2010, Forest and Kearns 2001, Hawkley et al. 2008). As Andersson (1998) unpacks “the subjective manifestation of experiencing loneliness is fundamental to the understanding of the problem (266).” This acknowledgement of the fact that loneliness may be undefinable yet in order to study it and combat it, researchers and humans need to understand the deeper mechanisms that cause the phenomenon of loneliness. The objective outcome of using qualitative research is to understand these deeper mechanisms.

While nearly everyone commented on how challenging it was to define loneliness, they all then talked about what it meant to them. Jane, a female bodied white person in her 20’s, looked dazed as she responded “It is like definitely an emotion. I feel it in my stomach. I do really like being alone, but I think that loneliness to me is being alone when I know that there is no one to go to. When the knowledge that no one is there for me.” Ashley, another young white woman, a first year at a public university said that loneliness to her means “if you are having a hard time and you don’t know how to talk to people about it. Or if you are with people and you don’t feel accepted.” Nick, a young white man maybe in his 30s says that he is not lonely yet defines loneliness as: “To me loneliness is having a sense of emotional isolation pervade

everyday thoughts and feelings. It's feeling as though your personal experiences and daily emotions are unshareable or uncared about by the other people in your life and around you.”

These recollections of loneliness show that even though everyone has a different lived experience of it, people know what loneliness is. All the interview subjects spoke of the pain of loneliness and the discomfort – and sometimes agony – of experiencing loneliness. Everyone that was interviewed knew what loneliness was.

There are no consistent themes about how people talk of loneliness. Some people experience it as a physical pain – an ache in their chest or nausea in their stomach – and some people definite it as a product of social space. Some people that were interviewed only feel it when they are alone and some people feel it when they are surrounded by people.

Emergent Themes:

One theme that was found in eight of the interviews was the inability to know who to turn to when times get hard. While there was some class discrepancy to this theme, people of lower and middle socioeconomic status talked more about not knowing who to go to, this was a huge theme that emerged and in a way goes to the heart of loneliness. People of lower socioeconomic status and middle socioeconomic status all talked about not always knowing who to go to. Fewer people of higher socioeconomic status discussed this. One woman – a black young woman of lower socioeconomic status – said that loneliness is at its most intense when she is “having a problem or something [she] needs to talk about and not knowing who [she] can talk to about the problem. And going down the list of people in [her] head and being like nope I can't talk to this person for this reason nor this one for this reason. And getting to the end of the list and not having anyone to talk to in that moment.” For a middle socioeconomic status white male,

loneliness is the worst when his “personal experiences and daily emotions are unshareable or uncared about.” While loneliness comes in many shapes and feelings, and while humans are an inherently social species and need to spend time together laughing, playing, exercising, and having fun together it is also a core need to have people there to support one when times are hard (Cacioppo et al. 2009).

A second, and more prominent, theme that emerged in the interviews was that many people talked about how there are multiple different types of loneliness. Loneliness is a term that people use for a similar sort of feeling, yet that feeling is different for everyone – sometimes it is a physical pain and sometimes it is a feeling that is a product of social space. Alongside, interview subjects experiencing loneliness in a different way, individuals experience loneliness due to different experiences. The majority of people in the interviews talked about how there is a difference between innerpersonal loneliness and then also not being accepted by society/broader scale loneliness. While the levels of being affected by these two types of loneliness were impacted by race, socioeconomic status, gender, and age, nearly everyone had experienced it despite those demographics. If someone fits more in with the hegemonic culture, the less societal loneliness they experience yet even the white, straight, cis, upper class men that were interviewed understood that there were different types of loneliness.

Wesley, a young black woman from lower socioeconomic status background, looked thoughtfully at me for a while before looking out the bus window and saying:

“Loneliness, there are different types of loneliness. They could be categorized as like big loneliness and small loneliness, or like long loneliness and short loneliness. Or internal and external loneliness. [...] Internal is bigger and longer, like something is missing and it hurts and it’s deep and it’s effecting me and the way I think about things and do things and it lasts and it has a long duration. And in the grand scheme of things I feel lonely. And external loneliness would be me sitting in my room being like ‘I wish someone was here with me’ or like the difference between going for a walk with someone else versus by

myself. I have definitely experienced both of those. Societal loneliness is lasting and is always there with an undertone and I am always feeling it even if I am with other people.”

Wesley went on later to say how “it is very lonely to have an identity that many people don’t have and how when [she] look[s] around in a crowd [she] wonder[s] if anyone is feeling the same thing as [her] because they all look different than [her].” Wesley talks about how this external societal loneliness and this curiosity of if she is accepted by society impacts her interpersonal relationship loneliness as well: “it is like I am with people but I am not trusting that they are there with me. Even if they are there with me or say that they are there for me, I am not trusting that they are actually there for me.”

While Wesley says that these two types of loneliness are interconnected and impacted each other, Wesley says that both types of loneliness are immensely painful. While there is virtually no literature that talks about these two distinct types and experiences of loneliness, there is literature that discuss the fact that people from minority groups often do not share their experience of loneliness because the hegemonic group doesn’t understand what that experience is like (McWhirter 1997). The loneliness that McWhirter (1997) is talking about appears to be the societal loneliness. Wesley showcases that it is both the societal and the interpersonal loneliness that is not understood by the hegemonic group due to the fact that those types of loneliness are interconnected.

Ashley, a white young female of higher socioeconomic status, who fits more into the hegemonic culture in this metropolitan area in the United States, reveals that even for her “there are many forms of loneliness.” Ashley goes on to talk about three different types of loneliness that she has experienced, one is “not knowing how to talk to people” such as her family or people who are close to her when there is conflict with them, the second is being “with people

and you don't feel accepted and then you feel more lonely" and feeling that something core about her is not valued by a group of people, and the last way that she says she feels lonely is "just not having a community [...] is really bad" which has happened when she has moved someplace new resulting in feeling that she has no one and is isolated and removed from people.

An elderly white woman of higher socioeconomic status talked to me for almost two hours on the bus telling me how lonely she was. This woman, Miranda, told me that the most painful loneliness for her was interpersonal, that the pain of loneliness is most intense when there is "an emptiness that comes because [she is] missing somebody." While Miranda told me about how the majority of her loneliness stems from not seeing her family because they live too far away, she also mentioned that "sometimes because [she is] Jewish [she] feel[s] like not as wanted but most of the time [she doesn't] feel antisemitism." Miranda says that the majority of her loneliness comes from interpersonal relationships, the fact that she did mention this broader sense of loneliness due to societal discrimination could possibly be interpreted that she also feels these multiple types of loneliness despite not directly saying so.

Mack, a high socioeconomic status, white man that I met at the airport claims that he believes a lot of white wealthy men are feeling lonely "because they are the majority group and they have been seen to be the majority group in this country for a long, long time and they have been raised and socialized to think of themselves as the ruling class and the power, economic and political power class. And as that slowly crumbles that is the group that feels the most put out and angered by that." Mack maintains that he is not lonely and that he has not felt this type of loneliness, but that there was a difference between feeling lonely the type of loneliness where "if one feels overwhelmed or stressed out then [they] want a shoulder to cry on" versus a loneliness that comes from a desire to be recognized as societally important. For Mack to convey that

people of his same demographic feel these two types of loneliness is valuable information to consider, even while he is asserting that he does not feel this way. There are reasons why he may have expressed that he does not feel lonely, one could be that he truly does not and another could be that Mack has been socialized to not talk about his experiences with loneliness (Borys and Perlman 1985).

Based off of the findings in the interviews -- with the acknowledgement that as one of the few researchers who have examined this specific topic there may be bias from the interview questions, my interpretations of the interviews, and the small sample size. With an encouragement for people to conduct future studies on the various ways loneliness manifests, it appears that the distinction between interpersonal and societal loneliness is that societal loneliness is less obvious but more consistent with a duller pain that exists from not being valued by society as a whole. Whereas interpersonal loneliness comes from having conflict with people you love or being rejected by friendships or being physically alone, it is a sharp and immediate pain that can go away. Societal loneliness appears to always be there, whether it is a young black woman feeling alone in her experiences while surrounded by a white culture or even being less valued by society because of being black or if it is a white wealthy man who feels that he is supposed to have the power yet knows that is wrong and is unsure how to grapple with knowing that everyone should be equal but also losing his own power and status and therefore his idea of being worthy (Vanciuyesen and Van Craen 201, Michael 1994). While each of these experiences is very individual and very different, and while one may be more painful or harmful than the other, they both are a sense of loneliness on a larger scale that goes beyond their own relationships and beyond who they have a close connection to. As Wesley said, often times this broader societal loneliness impacts how one interacts within their personal relationships and

therefore affects how interpersonal loneliness manifests. Jews who have experienced intergenerational trauma, such as with Miranda are raised to unconsciously experience a fear mindset that sometimes manifests in acts of appearing desperate which can push people away which then causes interpersonal loneliness (Winship and Knowles 1996, Last 1988). While these two themes emerged for everybody, more themes appeared which were dependent on demographic characteristics.

Socioeconomic Status and Loneliness:

Perceptions

A dissonance and disconnect appeared in the interviews between peoples perceptions and the reality of how people experience loneliness. Almost half of the people interviewed perceived that people of higher socioeconomic status were lonelier, whereas just over a quarter said that they believed that people of lower socioeconomic status were lonelier. These perceptions are nearly opposite of the reality of the empirical data. People of lower socioeconomic status are the loneliest. This section explores why there are these perceptions.

This study showed that in reality there is a substantial difference between how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness and that people of lower socioeconomic status are the most vulnerable to it. While much of the limited literature and research backs this finding (Benner and Wang 2014, de Jong Gieverld et al. 2006, Forrest and Kearns 2001, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1998), it is compelling that many people perceive that higher socioeconomic status people are the loneliest. The narratives presented in the interviews revealed that people had formed this image of wealthier people as being isolated and pretentious. In one interview, a middle-aged man of high socioeconomic status said:

“I think people who have too much think that having a lot gives them happiness but [they] discover that it doesn’t give them happiness. I think some of the loneliest people that I have ever met are some of the wealthiest people that I have ever met, they are isolated, and they intentionally isolate themselves by their behavior which often has to do with their showing off their wealth. [...] I think that [people with a] minority status and [who are not] accepted by the majority community, they actually form very tight communities.”

While this subject makes more than \$200,000 per year and does not feel lonely himself, he still has an image of people who are of high socioeconomic status as being isolated and lonely. Other interviews report similar feelings.

Philip, an elderly white man of higher socioeconomic status, agrees with Mack adding that he believes that “frequently the working-class people have a bigger network of support. They might be less lonely than the very, very wealthy.”

Bobbi, a young white woman of middle class, reported that she is part of a national organization called Resource Generation where one thing that she has heard is that “because people of lower class don’t have money to rely on, they have to rely on each other more which is less isolating and less lonely.”

Daisy, a middle age white upper-class woman, said that “like really really rich people are not the most emotionally healthy, you know.” Daisy went on to explain that her family was wealthy, she personally made around \$200,000 a year and her parents and spouse made more than that. Daisy did not say anything about her own family being emotionally unhealthy but she said that her dad was not raised with a lot of money and “being able to be emotionally vulnerable is something [one] can see in [her] dad’s family.”

All of these people have this vision of emotionally unhealthy, lonely, wealthy people being reclusive and pretentious. While this may be true, as some people that I interviewed who were very wealthy reported that they were lonely, however none communicated that they were

extremely lonely. The majority of people who said that they were very lonely were of lower socioeconomic status. There is no real answer in the literature nor in the primary research conducted to why this dissonance between reality and perception exists.

Wesley, a black young woman of lower socioeconomic status who tells that she is very lonely, said that if she felt lonely and was higher socioeconomic status it would be even worse.

Wesley went on to explain:

“Regular people who have a lot of money are really comfortable, if I didn’t have any redeeming qualities I would wonder why I feel lonely even though I have everything I could possibly need. Like right now, I have all these things that I want and all these things that I need. But if I had all those things, I would feel a dissonance if I had more money. If I was going to the parties and going to the social clubs and golfing and I still felt lonely, I would feel so confused.”

Wesley never said her perceptions on who, based on socioeconomic status, was most likely to be lonely. Yet she did say that having less money herself has really impacted her own experience of loneliness, and how she thinks if she had more money and could go out more and did not have to work as much that she would feel less lonely. The logic and reason behind being lonely due to not having enough resources appears to be beneficial for Wesley, as she said she would be confused if she felt this way and had enough resources.

This study reveals that people of lower socioeconomic status are lonelier than people of higher socioeconomic status, yet the majority of the people interviewed perceived that people of higher socioeconomic status were lonelier. The logic of people that were interviewed was often times the idea that hard times brought people together and that minority’s need to bond together to survive the system. As discussed before, there is hardly any literature nor answers within this study that helps understand the reason of *why* people perceive that people of lower socioeconomic status bond more together. The only potential explanation is from Bobbi when she talks about the perception of Resource Generation – an organization she works for that was

talked about earlier in this essay -- saying that “because people of lower class don’t have money to rely on, they have to rely on each other more which is less isolating and less lonely.” In one of McDowell et al.’s (2013) interviews, one subject backs up this idea by speaking on her own experience of relying on family more than money. While most people respect and want money and status to an extent, McDowell et al. (2013) hypothesis is that people perceive money and capitalism as something corrupt and destructive (McDowell et al. 2013), which one can draw from this a possible conclusion that people perceive people with less money as less nefarious or unethical. This could potentially mean that people think that people of lower socioeconomic status have been able to form more genuine connections that are not based on money nor greed.

Lower Socioeconomic Status Experience with Loneliness

The people that were interviewed that qualified as lower socioeconomic status spoke about connection and value in a disparate way than people of higher socioeconomic status. When asked about relationships and connection, people of lower socioeconomic status said things such as:

Relationships and “support mean to me, both having people who are willing to talk to me and who I feel comfortable to talk to as well.”

“[Connection] is definitely good listening and active listening and asking questions and it is one thing to just listen to someone but it is another thing to help them sift through it. And I appreciate and seek support where people help me sift through things and problem solve and work through things. So that would be good support for me or sometimes just affirmation is just good support when you are feeling really insecure.”

The reason why people of lower socioeconomic status used rhetoric that made it appear that people of lower socioeconomic status value connection more than people of higher socioeconomic status is unclear. There were not answers neither within the research nor in the

previously existing literature. My hypothesis, based off of the information collected through the interviews is that due to lack of access to professional success or social capital people of lower socioeconomic status have to find value in other places, they crave connection and affirmation through relationships instead of through career and status.

While people of lower socioeconomic status talk about being seen and building relationships as a way to be valued, they also talk about how loneliness plays a role in their relationships and how their socioeconomic status makes it more challenging to meet the needs of their relationships.

Wesley, a young black woman who makes less than \$30,000 a year, spoke of her troubles being able to network and keep up with friends and how she saw her mom have the same struggles when her mom was raising her. As Wesley addressed how socioeconomic status plays a role in her own loneliness she says that “certain things like occupation, schedule, and interests [are important]. If a solution of loneliness is socializing with other people, which it is for a lot of people, and if you don’t have the time or the money to spend time and money with other people than that would feel really lonely.” Wesley went on to talk about her childhood:

“When I was growing up I always felt like my mom was feeling really lonely because she worked 40 hours a week and then took care of me and my brother. I always was really excited for her to find friends in my friend’s parents and moms, and I always wanted that for her. She has friends, she always has friends, friends she has known since high school. But like her, I wanted her to have people that wanted to hang out every weekend. She only saw people like once maybe twice a month. She would always make friends with our neighbors, and then they were always there on a long night if she could she would go over to one of their rooms [in the apartment building] and watch football and have a drink. I think if she had been in a place where we were more financially secure and we had more leisure time, she could have spent more time building friendships and branching out as opposed to just being with people that were the most easy to access.”

Wesley revealed that now she is having a similar experience to what she watched her mom go through. She said that most of her friendships have come out of accessibility but doesn’t

feel that those friendships would necessarily be there to support her if she really needed it.

Wesley also spoke on the fact that being a black, queer woman of lower socioeconomic status made her often feel out of place and curious if other people are having similar feelings or reactions. Wesley addressed the fact that there is only one other woman of color in her office saying that:

“Lately I have been going to my coworker to vent. We are the only two women of color in our office. And a lot of problems that she has experienced, I have seen or heard about. And we just sit in my car, idling, idling wasting gas and killing the planet and talking to each other. Because we understand each other’s experiences. [...]When you have an identity or an experience and you are surrounded by people that have not had that experience or do not have that identity, that can feel really lonely too.”

Ava, another black woman, who is now dating someone of higher socioeconomic status says that having been raised lower class but now having access to wealth has helped her to see how little society values people of lower socioeconomic status and the personal blame that society puts on people of lower socioeconomic status. Ava reported that “not having the money or status can make you feel undervalued in society.” Bobbi talked about her aunt who is lower socioeconomic status, making less than 40,000\$ a year as a single mother and trying to raise two young children. Bobbi asserted that “[my aunt] often times has trouble holding a job. She is really smart but just not good at keeping a job, she doesn’t like schedules or being held to do something. She used to work on a farm, which was perfect for her but she didn’t make enough money that way to support her kids. I think she has a lot of shame about not being good at holding a job, I think she often feels like a failure or lazy even though she works hard and cares a lot. It seems that because she cannot fit into society’s idea of success that she feels like a failure.” One hypothesis that can be drawn from this, is that while people of higher socioeconomic status find worth in conforming to societal success, people of lower socioeconomic status are often

times told that they are lazy or a similar rhetoric which means that they have to find worth in interpersonal relationships. Yet interpersonal relationships are often strained for people of lower socioeconomic status due to accessibility and work (Shelton and Wilson 2006, Kearns et al. 2015).

Like Wesley, Grant, a middle aged white man who is gay and lower socioeconomic status, disclosed that he is very lonely and that he is trying to meet more people however he is “between jobs right now. [And] if [he] had spare money, [he] could go out to bars or other places where people congregate and at least get some social interaction, even if it is less deep than hanging out with friends.”

As Sara, Skye, Nick, Grant, Wesley and others talk about their loneliness, they all address the reasons why socioeconomic status impacts their experience of loneliness. The primary reasons addressed in the interviews as to why socioeconomic status has impacted their loneliness are: having to work long hours at jobs or work multiple jobs to survive and provide for their family, struggles with transportation such as limited bus routes or long bus times to visit family and friends. Most people of lower socioeconomic status that were interviewed said that they did not have a car due to the expense. Both the interviews and the literature showcase that lower income jobs do not promote work comradery. Seven people that were interviewed talked about not being able to afford to go out to activities, three people talked about how their neighborhoods – which tended to be lower income neighborhoods – have a high turnover rate in residents which makes it challenging to establish a community in their neighborhood. Six people of lower socioeconomic status also talked about the inability to afford professional help or seek professional aid, such as seeing a therapist after a loss or during a period of conflict, due to finances. Lastly people of lower socioeconomic status also spoke about a loneliness that

stemmed from a lack of feeling wanted and valued by society or feeling shame in their jobs or that they were viewed as lazy when they were unable to keep their jobs.

Higher Socioeconomic Status Experience with Loneliness

The people that were interviewed that qualified as the least lonely were people of higher socioeconomic status. Only 25% of the people that qualified as higher socioeconomic status reported being lonely at any capacity. While the majority of people of higher socioeconomic status reported that they were not lonely, many reported that they also did not have a large support network. People of higher socioeconomic status expressed that they felt valued by their professional success.

For the first part of this section, I will touch on how people of higher socioeconomic status spoke about where they found value and connection in their life. Philip, an elderly white man, talked extensively about how important being successful was to him. The next segment will showcase the dialogue that we had “P” will stand for Philip and “R” will stand for researcher.

R: “In your relationships and friendships, what makes you feel seen and valued?”

P: “I’ve had a very successful professional life. And I have felt valued as a professional physicist since graduate school when I was well respected as a graduate student and now I have become well respected in my professional life.”

R: “And within your relationships outside of your professional field, how do you feel valued?”

P: “When people know about me, then they know that I have been a very successful person in my field. There are people that I am aware of that are far brighter and more successful in their professional field. But I have absolutely no sense of competition or no sense of inferiority to them, they are just far better of scientists than I am and I am perfectly happy with that.”

R: “So for like, your wife or people who aren’t in the field of physics, do you feel like you are valued because of your achievements as a physicist or do you think you are valued for other things as well?”

P: “I am probably valued for other things as well. But my success plays a role as well, one of my grandkids is very into how famous I am. But I don’t just rely on that. I know I am valued for other things, like how sweet and kind and warm and handsome I am.”

While stern faced Philip joked at the end of that segment of dialogue about “how sweet and kind and warm and handsome” he is – winking in a kind and playful way at me after saying that – it appeared that he did not feel valued in ways outside of his success, even when asked about personal relationships he spoke about how he believes his grandchild finds his success notable.

Alongside feeling valued and experiencing connection through social capital and status, many people of higher socioeconomic status that were interviewed spoke on their trouble relaxing. Jane, a high socioeconomic status white woman, declared that “vacations are sort of hard because I am very bad at relaxing.” Miranda, an elderly white woman of higher socioeconomic status, announced that “I find it very hard to relax.” And Mack, a middle-aged white man who makes over \$200,000 a year, when asked the question “what do you do to relax?” answered “I am a bad person to ask that. I don’t do anything. I haven’t had a day off in more than a year and a half now. That is a very bad thing. So what I do try to do is, and I have become worse at this, I do try to do meditative breathing exercises a couple times a day. Just to try and relax and clear my mind. I used to read and hike, but now there is just no time for any of these things.” Nearly everyone else of higher socioeconomic status that was interviewed talked about struggles with relaxing. There is a correlation between having trouble relaxing and finding value in career success.

However, the reason behind why people of higher socioeconomic status are less lonely yet find trouble relaxing is not clear. Mogilner (2010) showcases the connection between finding time to relax and increased social connection due to the fact that when “individuals spend more

time with friends and family and less time working these behaviors are associated with greater happiness (Mogilner 2010: 1).” It would be easy to guess that increased time working and decreased time relaxing, being with family members and friends would lead people to be lonely, yet there is a disconnect behind these studies and the empirical data showcasing, both in this research and in other studies (Andersson 1998, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Hawkley et al. 2008, Kearns et al. 2015), that people of higher socioeconomic status tend to be less lonely. I first hypothesized that people of higher socioeconomic status used work as a means to escape, however when I asked participants about that they responded:

“Oh no I don’t think so at all. I think quite the opposite in fact, I think that too much work and not enough time for other things is actually negative.”

and

“I don’t think work is an escape at all. At any given moment I have 20-30 things that I have to do that are waiting for me to do. And that doesn’t put you in a happy place, that puts you in a sad place.”

One form of ‘societal’ loneliness for people of higher socioeconomic status is the idea that many people of higher socioeconomic status are raised with the idea that everything they are valued for has to do with success, that there needs to be a certain level of perfectionism to be worthy for people with wealth (Douilliez and Lefevre 2011, Kerner 2007, Elion et al. 2012). While there is no clear answer for why this is, Miranda – an elderly white woman of higher socioeconomic status – suggests that it could have to do with how important one perceives their work to be. She suggests that “the more educated and the more sophisticated and the more

diversity of experiences you have, in principle that could have an effect on your feeling of loneliness. You will be busy doing things that are important.” While Miranda conveys that she is lonely, she did add that she feels the least lonely when she is doing work and feeling like her work is important in the world. Often times people of lower socioeconomic status are actually busier and have less flexibility in their schedule, but potentially – and this is truly just a hypothesis based off of Miranda, Philip, and Mack’s experiences with feeling like their work is so important – people of lower socioeconomic status feel that their work is not as meaningful in the world, especially if they are working low income jobs such as working at a fast food restaurant like Sammy or between jobs like Grant.

Despite the fact that people of higher socioeconomic status talk about their value of professional success and many asserted that they have trouble relaxing; the ability to afford to take time off, travel to see family and friends, afford trips or are able to go out to drinks and activities, are able to afford a therapist or move if things are too hard in their current location all are privileges that buffer against loneliness.

Another theme, alongside feeling that they are valued by their prestige and have trouble relaxing, is that many people of higher socioeconomic status said that despite not being lonely hardly ever, they voiced that they did not have a large support network or not many friends.

Mack, a middle-aged white man of higher socioeconomic status, disclosed that:

“So...a community, you know I have my wife and son as my immediate community. And then I have family and friends around the world that are a strong community, but not many here. One of my best friends, lives in Europe, and he and I talk professionally about once a week but those are professional conversations but they sometimes become personal conversations. And if I felt like I was in trouble, I would feel completely comfortable calling on him. I don’t have a lot of friends, which is intentional, but I do have a couple of really good friends. Like three or four really good friends.”

When asked about his support system, Mack went on to add: “Yea that is a bit more problematic. By a lot of definitions, I don’t have a great support system. There aren’t a lot of people that I talk to about issues or stress. Those I tend to internalize.” This fear of reaching out relates back to the need for perfectionism and success to dictate one’s worth that stems from being white and wealthy. By being the person to reach out, it could potentially mean that one is flawed. So while this inability to reach out, need for perfectionism, and not knowing how to relax all should be signs of loneliness (Mogiliner 2010), the question of why people of higher socioeconomic status are less lonely needs to be addressed. While there is no clear nor definitive answer to this question, a hypothesis can be drawn from the literature and the empirical data. While this study attempted to look at the deeper mechanisms behind loneliness, and not just the idea of social isolation as a cause of loneliness, the hypothesis behind this is that having resources to go out and meet people or to seek professional help is quintessential to buffering against loneliness. This aligns with much of the existing literature that argues social interaction is one of the most important buffers against loneliness (Andersson 1998, Benner and Wang 2014, Berkman and Glass 2000, Burke et al. 2010, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Forrest and Kearns 2001, Hawkley 2008).

Middle Socioeconomic Status Experience of Loneliness

In nearly all of the interviews conducted and the majority of the literature, researchers rarely mention people who qualify as middle socioeconomic status’s experience with loneliness (Agnew 1980, Andersson 1998, Cacioppo et al. 2009). Research is mostly concerned with the two extremes: how being high socioeconomic status or low socioeconomic status impacts one’s experience with loneliness. There are rarely discussions about how people of middle

socioeconomic status experience loneliness. Despite the lack of data and analysis around middle socioeconomic status people and their experience of loneliness, 50% of people who qualified as middle socioeconomic status in this research responded that they were very lonely. Despite 50% of people of middle socioeconomic status saying that they were lonely, people of middle socioeconomic status appear to have the most extensive communities in this research group. As people of lower socioeconomic don't have the resources to network or go out and make friends and people of higher socioeconomic status claim that they either weren't good at making friends, didn't need a lot of friends, or didn't have the time to be going out and meeting people – though seemed to have a more extensive support network through their work. People of middle socioeconomic status talk about having the most extensive support network, Bobbi discusses her experience expressing that “my family has an amazing and huge support system. I grew up surrounded by a community of amazing humans that would all bring me birthday gifts or would send me off when I went to school or would check in with my family, watching my mom have this community was amazing. Yet even with this community and support network she was still lonely.”

Having this support network is a huge buffer against loneliness, which is apparent in the fact that people of middle socioeconomic status are far less lonely than people of lower socioeconomic status. However, it is curious that people of middle socioeconomic status have a self-proclaimed wider support network than people of higher socioeconomic status yet are still lonelier than people of higher socioeconomic status.

Skye, a young white woman of middle socioeconomic status who is in law school and wants to work for the CIA or FBI eventually, seemed to explain this balance of having both the push for perfectionism that high socioeconomic status people have alongside a reduced version

of the stress of resources that people of lower socioeconomic status have. Having the resources, the societal push, and the wealth to “do something meaningful with my life” is a buffer against loneliness yet the stress of sometimes not having enough causes loneliness too.

Skye recounts this juxtaposing nature of being middle class by saying:

“External or sometimes internal moments of stress, anxiety, and pressure tend to make me feel lonely. If I feel like I have not done a good job at work or in school or lived up to my commitments or turned someone down, I feel anxious. On the other hand, if I say yes to everything and have zero time for myself to recover, I also feel anxious. So that is a fun balance to find. If I feel anxious for long enough, then I start to feel lonely. I think this has changed for me over the years. More things used to make me feel lonely that no longer do, like my health and physical status or like my existential angst or certain perfectionist tendencies that I have, and so on. [...] If you don’t have enough money to go out with friends, participate in certain activities requiring payment, purchase gifts, or cover someone else’s coffee/drink/meal, that can feel limiting. There have been times when I have not had enough money to participate in certain activities, but I feel more guilty than lonely. I know that I could participate if I really wanted to ask my family to help me out. But I would rather not turn to them for support for everything. Still, that choice to ask for familial financial support isn’t available to everyone.”

The conclusions drawn from these interviews and people of different socioeconomic status’s experiences with loneliness are that one’s access to resources really matters for how one experiences loneliness. Having stress of not having enough resources means less flexibility in time, so while people may be happier if they have more time relaxing or less societal or family pressure to be perfect and successful (Douilliez and Lefere 2011, Elion et al 2012, Mogilner 2010), that doesn’t necessarily mean that people are less lonely. One hypothesis that I draw from this research is that loneliness still functions as a survival mechanism. As loneliness used to function as a way to ensure people remained in their community because community was so important for protection and hunting (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2012, Cacioppo et al. 2003, Goossens et al. 2015, Cacioppo et al. 2013, Cacioppo et al. 2006). My hypothesis is that the deeper mechanisms of loneliness still function as a factor of survival and is stemming from a stress of surviving, so therefore the more resources people have the less they experience this

stress of either not fitting into society or not having people to go to or time to go to people – whether or not they have a large support system, having money means having the resources to make a large support system even if they entails simply hiring support – which buffers them against true extreme loneliness.

Sex, Gender, Race & Intersectionality

Many demographic characteristics factor into one's experience of loneliness, for instance elderly people are some of the most vulnerable to experiencing loneliness (Hawkey et al. 2008). In this research project, demographic factors outside of socioeconomic status clearly related to reasons why some people experienced loneliness more than other people. The interviews did not ask about sexuality or how people identified for gender or race. However, everyone who said that they were LGBTQ+ in the interviews also said that they were lonely. Which is interesting because again people perceived people who are LGBTQ+ as less lonely. Mack estimated that:

“I think that often times for example the LGBTQ community, I think because of their minority status and lack of acceptance by the majority community they actually formed very tight communities, I think it also goes back to your definition of loneliness, like not being accepted by your family or people you grew up with would be a horrible thing and could lead to certain feelings of loneliness. But I think overall those groups form very tight knit communities, and those communities completely keep that loneliness at bay.”

Due to the fact that the interviews were designed to collect information on how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness, no one who actually identified as LGBTQ+ explained how being LGBTQ+ impacted their experience of loneliness. Yet everyone who said that they were LGBTQ+ revealed that they were lonely. This is backed up by the literature as well, struggles

with identity, not fitting into family units, and stigmatization all lead to feelings of loneliness with people who are LGBTQ+ (Preston 2013).

The second, and more notable, theme that arose around gender and sexuality was the gender divide in who reported that they were lonely. While I did not ask people how they identified, I based gendered assumptions off of whether people were female bodied or male bodied. I first want to acknowledge that being female bodied or male bodied does not mean that one identifies as that gender, in this essay however I will be going off of the assumption that the people interviewed do identify with the gender their body appears to be.

All female bodied people that were interviewed said that they were lonely, to some degree. While only 50% of the people who were male bodied reported being lonely. Only one person, Nick a white male of middle socioeconomic status, talked about how gender might impact one's experience of loneliness. Nick communicated that he was rarely lonely yet alleged that he assumed that gender was an important factor in determining people's vulnerability of loneliness. Nick said:

“I think the different sexes experience loneliness in different ways, though it's probably mostly a socially-imbued difference rather than a biological one. Men are generally regarded as more independent than women by our society for one. This can certainly lead to the idea that being lonely isn't really something that should be a problem for men, and perhaps makes it a more difficult feeling for men to discuss than women. While I have never experienced it, I know that maintaining friendships after having children can be difficult for parents. Especially mothers whose family follows the traditional dynamic of childcare being primarily her burden. There is also a certain sense in our culture that having children ad a family should do nothing but decrease loneliness. So, if someone still has that feeling after having kids, I wonder if they feel a certain pressure not to bring up their own loneliness out of a fear that it will be interpreted as a statement against their own family.”

Apart from this quote from Nick, no one else discussed how gender might impact one's experience of loneliness. Yet the distinction between the fact that all female bodied participants

answered that they were lonely on some level versus only half of the male bodied people conveying that they were lonely is noteworthy. There are a number of hypotheses and reasons for why this is. One reason that men are less likely to disclose that they are lonely could be that men do not want to admit loneliness (Hansson and Jones 1980, Borys and Perlman 1985), especially to a young, white, female researcher. This could be due to a number of justifications, which include not wanting to admit something that could be perceived or seen as a weakness so simply not honestly reporting their experience with loneliness (Hansson and Jones 1980, Borys and Perlman 1985). A second potential reason for why men were less lonely and fewer men reported being lonely is that men could actually be less lonely, women potentially have been socialized and told that they are supposed to have these deep connections and masculinity promotes the narrative that men are less dependent, more independent, and shouldn't have those feelings which actually result in men having a more limited experience of loneliness than women (de Jong Gieverld et al. 2006, Knox et al. 2007).

Women are often times given the narrative that they need to rely on other people, which would logically make people feel less lonely to have a larger network, however there is a greater chance that when one is given the narrative that they need to rely on more people there is a sense of incompleteness or missing something (Granello and Beamish 1998). Nick also brought up an important point about loneliness in family care and the role of the motherhood. Being a mother can be socially isolating and challenging which can lead to immense loneliness. Often time's mothers give much more than they receive from their children which can lead to feelings of loneliness and lack of having a support network (Richard et al. 1977). Although there are no concrete answers to why the male participants in this study reported being less lonely as well as less male participants reported being lonely – the distinction is levels of loneliness versus

numbers of people being lonely, there is clear and notable evidence to showcase that there is a gendered discrepancy for who experiences loneliness and who is most at risk for experiencing it.

In this sample pool, there was a limited number of people of color interviewed. The small sample size of people of color interviewed must be acknowledged as it may affect the results. All people of color that were interviewed expressed that they were lonely, whereas only 58% of white people interviewed said that they were lonely. As discussed in the socioeconomic status section, Wesley – a black woman of lower socioeconomic status – explained how she felt out of place when in a crowd and not as valued by society because of both being lower socioeconomic status as well as black. Being a minority can be really challenging, because the majority of the people do not understand the experience of a minority which is an isolating experience (Mcwhirter 1997), and can lead to feelings of loneliness.

The results that showcase that people of lower socioeconomic status, women, racial minorities, and people who are LGBTQ+ are lonelier all have a semblance of intersectionality. Often times women make less money than men and women of color even make less money than white women, Hayes (2019) discusses emerging research on this:

“The statistic cited above—that women make 77 cents on the dollar compared with men—is actually out of date. The latest study from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research noted that the 80 cents on the dollar figure usually cited is actually an overestimation for many women. In many segments of the population, women earn just 49 cents on a white man’s dollar. That said, white women earn about 79 cents per dollar compared with white men.

That broad pay gap is even wider for women of color compared with white men. African American women earned just 62.5 cents on the dollar, and Hispanic women earned just 54.4 cents on the dollar (Hayes 2019: 1).”

Within every category and demographic, the trend showcases that people who are often marginalized are also not able to access as much wealth as their counterpart – men can access

more wealth than women, white people can access more wealth than people of color, and anyone who fits more within the hegemonic culture and is more accepted by the system has an inherent privilege to accessing wealth (Crenshaw 1990, Cook et al. 2011, Vanden 2007). All of the other demographics within this research align with the results on socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

Loneliness is a feeling that is nearly universal, yet some people are more vulnerable to prolonged exposures of the experience of loneliness. Due to the subjective nature of loneliness, there is minimal literature on loneliness without the variable of social isolation (Hawkley et al. 2008, Ryan et al. 2008, Kearns et al. 2015, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987) or social capital (Benner and Wang 2014, Andersson 1998, Ryan et al. 2008, Kearns et al. 2015) involved. There are numerous variables that impact loneliness. One must consider age — there has been solid gerontology research that reveals that elderly people are less mobile and therefore experience higher levels of loneliness (Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987, Hawkley et al. 2008) , — race, gender, social capital, employment, etc. while studying loneliness. Within this broad field, I focused on socioeconomic status as an independent variable. There is virtually no research depicting how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness in academic literature. There is research that ties socioeconomic status to social capital (Hawkley et al. 2008,) and thereon social capital impacting the experience of loneliness (Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987). One limitation of this research is that all the research took place in the Western world, loneliness may manifest differently across the world and have different impacts. As Andersson (1998) said: the “condition we are studying is so disturbing that we surely have some responsibility to do what we can to be helpful to those who experience it (264),” loneliness has detrimental health effects. By studying the mechanisms behind loneliness and determining who is vulnerable, more

interventions can be determined and put in place to fight inequality and inequity as a cause of loneliness, and to mitigate the health consequences of loneliness.

One of the largest limitations to this study was a small sample size. With only 15 people interviewed and all people being from the same location, the sample size was not enough to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that cause loneliness nor completely understand nor observe the patterns of who is the most vulnerable to loneliness. Another limitation in this study was that, in order to understand the difference between why people of middle socioeconomic status have a larger support network than people of lower socioeconomic status yet experience higher degrees of loneliness, was that I did not ask about the frequencies of interactions within the interviews.

There is a disconnect between the empirical data and the perception of who is lonely, in my research I could not find a reason why this is and literature doesn't address why this is. Given these findings, future research should address the question of why that disconnect exists, frequencies of interactions, and the deeper meaning behind why people of higher socioeconomic status have a lower support network yet also lower amounts of loneliness. Given these limitations, future research should conduct a wider-ranging study and interview people from a variety of places across the United States.

Access to health, healthcare, and ways of life that are considered to promote well-being are often dictated by one's socioeconomic status. Having lower socioeconomic status can cause serious health issues based on environmental justice issues, transportation fumes, or not being able to rest one's body because the survival of one's family depends on attending work. This drastic inequality to accessing what should be a basic right – health – is in play because of the way society functions in the United States. One reason that this happens in the United States is

because of the individualistic mindset that encapsulates and runs nearly everything including the healthcare industry. The United States lacks interdependence and collective care and survival, which further isolates people from access to health based on their socioeconomic status. This individualistic mindset that is so valued in the United States creates isolation and inability of being there for each other. Both researchers and pop journals have claimed the Western world is experiencing a loneliness epidemic (Agnew 1980, Andersson 1998, Cacioppo et al. 2009, Hawkey 2008, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1988, Ryan et al. 2008).

With the continued emphasis on individuality, loneliness is causing health problems. Due to physical isolation and a widespread unwillingness to help others, many people's health problems deteriorate due to loneliness as well as many health problems are caused by extensive exposure to loneliness. Humans are a social species, which was originally a survival mechanism (Cacioppo et al. 2009). The feeling of loneliness was meant to force community and collective care for survival, and cause feelings of physical pain, sadness, and discomfort when pulling away from their community (Cacioppo et al. 2009). In a time where physical survival is not dependent on community in the same fashion, loneliness has become widespread and perplexing (Hawkey et al. 2008). Due to the subjective nature of it, loneliness is nearly impossible to define in a way that is unanimous. The purpose of this study was to bring together a collective definition of loneliness based off of 15 individual's definitions in an attempt to continue to pursue an understanding of what loneliness is. The main objective of the study is how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of loneliness. The study looks at both the health inequalities that socioeconomic status forces upon people while seeking to uncover who is most vulnerable to the experience of loneliness. Determining who is most vulnerable to loneliness will allow for future systems to be set in place to aid with interdependence and collective care and survival.

The broader implications of this research reveal that people of lower socioeconomic status are more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. With the knowledge that people of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience loneliness and the knowledge of the drastic health consequences of prolonged exposure to loneliness, it is important to act upon these and work on putting systems and preventative measures into place to support people of all backgrounds, and especially those with less access to wealth.

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