THE ISSUE OF LONELINESS IN THE PERIOD OF „EMERGING ADULTHOOD"

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Abstract
Loneliness is a complex and multidimensional life experience affecting almost each individual. However, due to the turbulent social and civilization changes, it seems that a modern man more and more frequently suffers this unpleasant condition as well as emotions accompanying loneliness, that is: sadness, despair, apathy, diffidence, a sense of alienation. The phenomenon of loneliness has become a serious problem especially among the youth. This group indeed is subjected to intense and acute sense of loneliness, which is a result of, among others, low level of social skills, lack of emotional maturity or teachers' and parents' insufficient interest in their problems.
The proposed paper will present the most important theoretical and empirical standpoints, and analyze types and symptoms of loneliness among the youth. When discussing the causes and consequences of the phenomenon, the author refers to both Polish (e.g. Public Opinion Research Center) and European research reports (e.g. Mental Health Report, SUPRE, ESPAD). The speech will also demonstrate selected institutional forms of support for the youth who experience loneliness as well as other emotional and social problems.

Keywords: Loneliness, period of „emerging adulthood", social and civilization changes

Introduction

Feeling of insecurity, anxiety, fear, losing the meaning of life, depression, neurosis and suicidal attempts – those are only some of the consequences of failing to cope with more and more frequent social and economic crises. U. Beck (2002) described the issue of emerging problems and disturbances as the „psycho-wave effect". It also seems that loneliness appears very often in everyday existence of many people. According to Z. Dołęga (2003), the problem of loneliness can be analyzed either from the perspective of individuals or whole social groups. It seems that young people experience the feeling of loneliness in particular due to civilizational and social changes.

The available sociological, psychological or pedagogical literature provides completely divergent descriptions of the situation of a contemporary young human being. Some sources present a very positive image of the youth – optimistic, open, satisfied with their lives, focused on everyday pleasures and, above all, feeling confident about the future (CBOS 2009). However, there is some disturbing data as well, showing a gradual increase in the number of young people suffering from mental and emotional problems (ref. Majerek B. 2011, 2012).

Contemporary young people experience many problems resulting from e.g. educational devaluation, difficulties in finding a job or living in a cyberspace and having problems with establishing relations with others. It seems that this group is most likely to experience negative consequences of civilization changes. Therefore, conducting studies and theoretical analyses is an important element in creating preventive and therapeutic schemes

used to deal with such problems. This article tries to analyze the feeling of loneliness, assuming that this emotional issue is the cause of many dangerous social problems.

1. Various faces of loneliness

Loneliness as an ontological phenomenon is the "universal quality of human existence, just as common and as frequently experienced as happiness, hunger or sadness" (Dołęga Z. 2003, p. 9). In the social and psychological perspective, however, loneliness is usually perceived as the sign of lack of personal well-being and is related to low level of satisfaction with one's life.

Loneliness should be analyzed on multiple levels as this feeling is very subjective and described using various emotions. According to J. Rembowski (1992), this unpleasant feeling is an emotional state, in which an individual is aware of being isolated from others and unable to act to their benefit (p. 33). J. Gajda (1997), however, believes that the problem of loneliness is undoubtedly related to other negative emotional states, such as:

- feeling of hopelessness, which means the conviction that people are left at the mercy of external powers and have no influence whatsoever on their lives;
- feeling of meaninglessness understood as the inability to tell what is important and worth believing in;
- feeling of anomie is the conviction that unacceptable behavior is necessary to achieve some goals;
- feeling of isolation leads to avoidance of social relations as one believes he/she is unable to establish any closer relations with others;
- feeling of self-alienation – it lowers one's self-esteem and makes them believe that acting in accordance with one's own beliefs would not lead to achievement of their goals (p. 205).

It is worth mentioning that the above emotional states should be considered temporally, i.e. they can manifest either as a short-term effect of failures or temporary difficult situations or a permanent quality, defining the quality of life of an individual. Similarly, loneliness has its own time dimension. It could be either chronic, i.e. last for years or even the whole life, or be only temporary, while breaking up a relationship or friendship, losing someone close (death, divorce, moving somewhere else). Each of us can experience short states of "everyday loneliness" despite having satisfying relations with other people (Stefańska-Klar R. 2002).

Therefore, there are many perspectives and angles, from which the phenomenon of loneliness can be analyzed. Z. Dołęga (2003), distinguishing three basic types of relations, i.e. with social environment, oneself and realm of values and goals in life, describes the following types of loneliness:

- feeling of social loneliness concerns experience of isolation and marginalization; inability to identify one's role in the social system or not being confident about one's importance to social partners […];
- feeling of emotional loneliness consists in perceiving oneself in a negative way in terms of being a social partner, believing in one's low social competences and exhibiting a distress manifesting in depressed mood and other negative emotions or feelings […];
- feeling of existential loneliness primarily means no identification with any values, standards or life goals; feeling of being „out" of this world or out of a broader social context and experiencing lack of integration with others (p. 22-23).

T. Gadacz (1995) describes moral loneliness, meaning no connection with any values, symbols or patterns. Moral loneliness stems from badly imparted behavioral patterns or lack of such patterns in the closest environment, from experiencing the crisis of values. "People experiencing this kind of loneliness feel unable to identify themselves with the values that

give their lives a meaning, without which they are not able to function normally" (Gadacz T. 1996, p.17).

At the same time it seems that complete loneliness described by M. Szyszkowa (1998) is a particularly overwhelming state. Such loneliness is experienced as lack of acceptance from anyone, feeling of being completely useless and stuck in a void or a labyrinth with no exit.

The available psychological, pedagogical and sociological literature provides a host of publications on the issue of loneliness. However, it seems that despite substantial theoretical knowledge, methods of limiting or combating negative emotional states resulting from the feeling of loneliness are quite limited. One may also have the impression that this problem is expanding and escalating as it concerns more and more persons experiencing more and more unpleasant and long-lasting states of emotional tension resulting from limiting, breaking or lacking social bonds.

2. Causes of loneliness in the period of "emerging adulthood"

The problem of loneliness is difficult to describe as it can be a result of many different aspects. It could be generated either by external factors (e.g. personality traits), specific situations (e.g. hospitalization or economic migration) or social factors (e.g. being rejected by a peer group or family). E. Dubas (2000) lists the following factors:

- external factors of global nature, e.g. technical and technological development, rapid urbanization and industrialization, consumerism, marginalization of the meaning of religion in human life, stereotypical lifestyle models (e.g. negative image of the old age) and contemporary cultural patterns;
- external factors of environmental nature focused on the closest environment;
- internal personality factors focused on destructive personality traits, such as pessimism, indifference, skepticism or egoism;
- ontological internal factors referring to the deepest parts of human existence in general.

Other types of feeling of loneliness have been presented by S. Kozak (2007), who pointed to:

- low self-esteem that makes people shy, insecure and weak, seeking support from others. However, if other people cannot satisfy their needs, a feeling of threat and severe loneliness appear;
- inability to communicate – when people cannot reach an agreement, a persisting feeling of loneliness and isolation appears even when someone is a member of a group or community;
- self-defensive attitude resulting from competitive approach becoming a lifestyle and consisting in constant strive for success regardless of negative social consequences;
- attitude of apparent independence and self-reliance.

While analyzing the causes of the feeling of loneliness, we must emphasize the role of developmental factors, as young people experience such state particularly during the period of adolescence. Adolescence-related physical changes (e.g. rapid body weight gain, changes in body shape) often result in the feeling of being different and dissatisfied with the "new" looks, causing withdrawal from social contacts. It is also worth to mention that the main developmental goal is achieving independence and autonomy, which must entail conflicts, rejection and temporary loneliness. A. Brzezińska (2002) wrote that such period is not only a transition from childhood into adulthood, but a true rite of passage understood not as a single episode, but as a phase. J. Arnett (2004) called this period, occurring from the age of 18 to 25-29, the "emerging adulthood" and described it as:

1. The time of seeking one's identity (continuation of the search started during the adolescence period); experimenting with new possibilities, usually in close relations,

at work and in one's world view and seeking what is best for them and – what follows – taking up new commitments gradually.

2. The time of instability and frequent changes (young people often change their place of residence or work).

3. The time of focusing on oneself (more than at any other point in life), answering the question "what I want" in order to make independent decisions; making one's point of view most important and making own experiences, observations and reflections absolute, pursuing one's own goals gradually.

4. The time of feeling like "being in-between", in a phase of transition, change of developmental status, not being adolescent anymore and not being adult yet (subjective autonomy).

5. The time of opportunities, hope, when people have the chance to make a change, create their own lives; the "emerging adults" are usually very optimistic about their future life and success (for: Lipska A., Zagórska W. 2011, p. 15).

Therefore, it should be emphasized one more time that the period of „emerging adulthood" is even more intense and unstable as young people must cope with all their efforts, decisions and failures alone. At the same time, it seems that in this exceptionally difficult period of life, young people experience negative consequences of changes in existential, civilization and macro-social areas in a special way. Educational devaluation, unemployment and forced migration are only some of the problems generating the feeling of insecurity, being lost and alone.

While looking for the causes of the feeling of loneliness among young people, family setting should be considered in the first place. On the one hand, the adults have no emotional bonds with the young people, no time to hear them out or no interest in their problems or their expectations exceed the young people's capabilities (ref. Domagała-Kręcioch A. 2008). On the other hand, however, the adults themselves often have difficulties in coping with everyday problems. According to the studies by Eurobarometer ordered by the European Commission in 2010 in EU countries, we may notice many alarming symptoms suggesting numerous emotional problems of the Europeans (*Mental Health Report* http://ec.europa.eu/health/mental_health/eurobarometers).

The diagram below contains data presenting the frequency of experiencing negative emotional states (i.e. tiredness, exhaustion, tension and depression) by the respondents. The analysis takes into consideration only those answers that suggest permanent, persisting negative states and emotions of the respondents.

Diagram 1. **Frequency of experiencing negative emotional states by the Europeans (the sum of the answers "all the time" and "most of the time")**
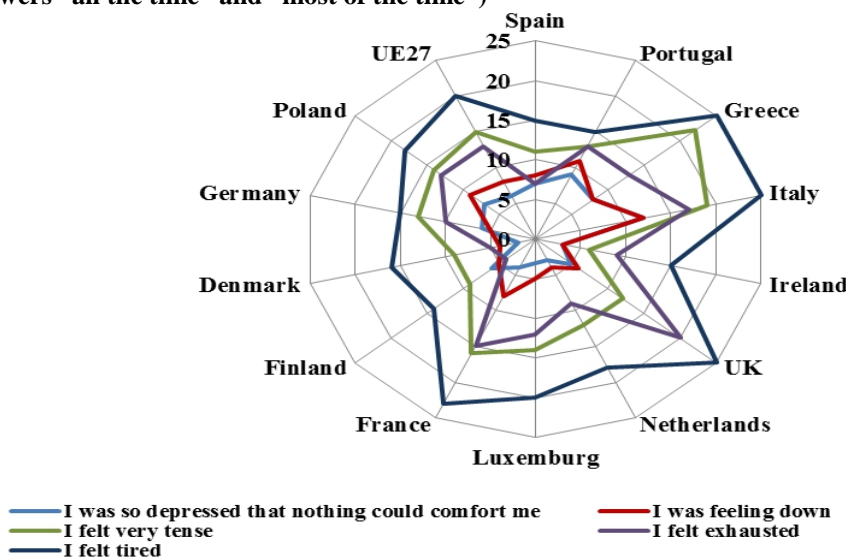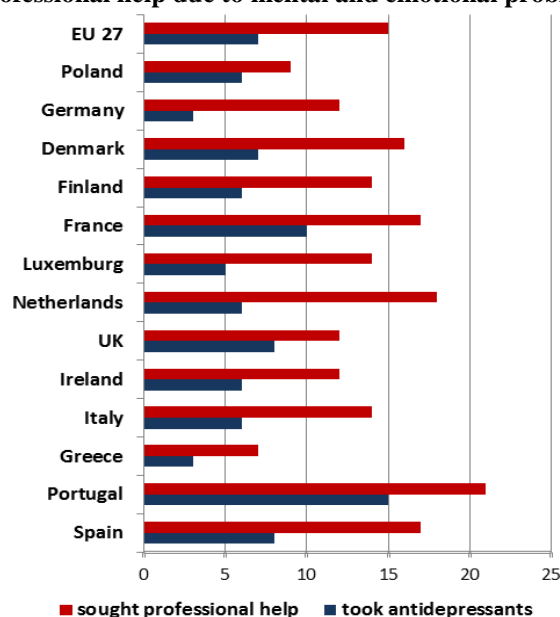

Source: Own work based on **http://ec.europa.eu/health/mental_health/eurobarometers**

The above presented data is alarming as according to it, one fifth of EU residents feel tired all the time. This figure increases to 25% in countries experiencing economic crisis, i.e. Greece and Italy. But almost 25% residents of the UK and France also feel tired. 13% of Europeans are tired of life permanently and 15% feel anxious all the time. Such tensions lead to permanent feeling of sadness and depression (8%) that often end with a feeling of failing at life and mental breakdown (6%). Chronic depression and sadness is most frequently experienced by the Italians (12%), Portuguese (11%), Poles (9%) and French (8%).

It should also be noted that poor mental condition of parents often becomes the direct reason of domestic violence and as J. Maćkowicz (2009) proved, such situation almost always entails the feeling of loneliness among child victims.

Further results of the above mentioned study also show the scale of problems of the Europeans today. The diagram below presents the percentage of respondents, who sought professional help during the last 12 months due to their mental and emotional problems.

Diagram 2.   Seeking professional help due to mental and emotional problems in selected EU countries

Source: Own work based on http://ec.europa.eu/health/mental_health/eurobarometers

According to the data in the diagram, 15% of Europeans sought professional help due to problems of mental or emotional nature and almost 8% of them have been taking antidepressants on a regular basis. The Portuguese are above the EU 27 average with 22% of the population seeking medical help. Also, almost 18% the Dutch, the French and the Spaniards sought specialist help in 2010 due to emotional problems. Portugal (15%) and France (10%) are the countries with the highest rate of people taking antidepressants.

The above data clearly point to the problems that people more and more often cannot deal with and living in a family, where fear, feeling of danger, insecurity and hopelessness are predominant are additional reasons why adolescents feel abandoned and lonely.

3. Physical, mental and social consequences of loneliness

Feeling of loneliness causes numerous problems that can be considered either in a global (e.g. diseases of affluence, i.e. neuroses, alcoholism, nicotine dependence) or individual aspect as far as their dimensions and scale are concerned. Consequences of loneliness are usually considered in three main categories:

1. Physical consequences, as the stress resulting from lack of relations with others weakens our immune system (Cichocka M. 2005). Such mental emptiness caused by loneliness also increases the risk of binge eating, obesity, diabetes, atherosclerosis and joint degeneration (Aleksandrowicz J. 1988).

2. Mental consequences associated with loneliness include mainly anxiety, pessimism, feeling of worthlessness and misery (Rembowski J. 1992). As a result of withdrawing from establishing social relations, the so called "narcissistic withdrawal" may also appear (Braun-Gałkowska M. 1994). Attention should also be drawn to the occurrence of loneliness-related depression (Dołęga Z. 2006). One of the common consequences of the feeling of loneliness, alienation and being unaccepted by the environment is self-destructive behavior, including direct self-aggression (e.g. beating, self-harm, self-accusation) and indirect aggression (e.g. when someone forces, provokes or submits to aggression of others) (Kozak S. 2007). What is more, the feeling of being rejected and lonely more and more frequently causes mental disorders (e.g. neurosis, depression) and suicides.

**Diagram 3.   Number of suicides per 100,000 residents (data as of 2009)**
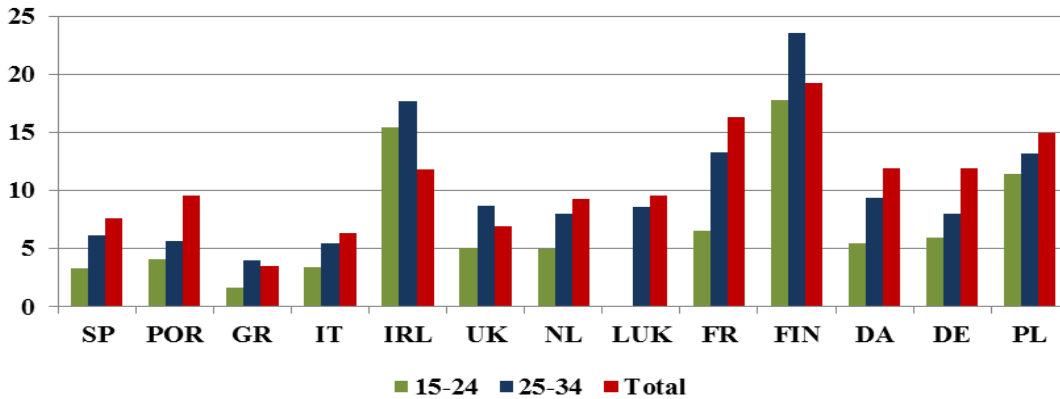
Source: www.who.int/menthal_health/media/arge.pdf

The above presented data show significant differences in the characteristics of the analyzed problem. There are countries, where young people, more often than other age groups, cannot cope with their lives and commit suicide, e.g. Finland, Ireland and the United Kingdom. What is really alarming is the fact that in Greece, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Finland, the number of suicidal attempts is higher among the youth than among the rest of the population. Considering all the countries listed above, suicide rate in Poland is very high among all age groups. It seems that young people in particular, left without professional help and support, commit suicide as they are not able to deal with their problems.

Social consequences appear usually when lonely young people want to become members of a social group, e.g. a cult, a youth subculture or an organized crime group. However, in order to gain social acceptance and interest, young people are „forced" to engage in risk behavior, such as smoking, drug abuse or prostitution. The scale of such problems is of course monitored on an ongoing basis and the results show a rather alarming tendency.

Diagram 3.   Risk behavior among young people
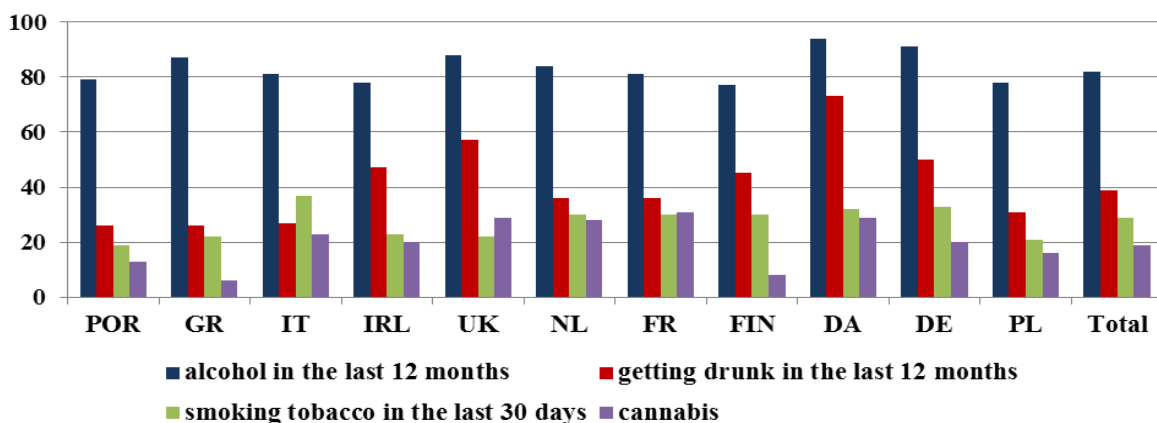
Source: www.espad.org

As it has been mentioned above, while discussing the problem of loneliness and related emotional issues, we cannot ignore the problem of engagement of young people in risk behavior, being often a way of coping with difficult situations. According to ESPAD 2007 report, 80% of young people aged 15-16 in almost all analyzed countries drink alcohol. Over 70% of young Dutch, nearly 60% of the British youth and over 50% of young Germans have gotten intoxicated in the last 12 months. From 20% to 30% of young people (depending on the country) smoke tobacco and use cannabis.

Conclusions and recommendations

The above analysis shows that emotional and mental problems are a part of everyday life of a majority of the Europeans. At the same time, such problems create a negative atmosphere, in which young people grow up. Lack of support from families affected by economic and mental crisis, lack of efficient problem-solving strategies make a large number of young people engage in self-destructive behavior. Undoubtedly, one of the major causes of such situation is the feeling of being lonely and abandoned in difficult everyday problems. Young people all over Europe live in the atmosphere of fear, anxiety and hopelessness and when being affected by a personal crisis or problem they probably too often hear the words "I don't know, I'm tired, depressed or exhausted". Such response forces them to deal with their problems on their own.

While making recommendations for teachers, the scale and importance of the issue of loneliness should be emphasized. Teachers and educators must see the problems of the youth in the first place. Recognizing first symptoms, i.e. decrease in social activity, isolating oneself from the peers or inability to maintain social bonds and relations, reduces the time needed for therapeutic process should negative consequences of loneliness and alienation occur. The importance of communication with others (e.g. engaging in a discussion, reading body language) should be also noted and the ability to identify one's own emotional states and seeking help in crisis situations should be developed as well. Teaching social sensitivity and openness to the needs of others to young people should also be an important task for the teachers. It should also be mentioned that the ability to identify emotional states of others should become an important element in education of parents.

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