THE LONELINESS OF ADOLESCENTS FROM SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUND

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Abstract: Every individual need social contact with other people in his or her life, to feel belonging, solidarity. If these needs are not fulfilled, he/she is threatened by loneliness, which significantly affects the quality of life of a person. It is particularly difficult to experience loneliness during adolescence. This alone is challenging for effective coping. Moreover, if the adolescent comes from a socially dependent environment, which is often not very stimulating, experiencing loneliness can lead to many negative phenomena, such as risk behaviour of a young person. The paper offers theoretical background and results of empirical research on the issue of experiencing loneliness in adolescents, while specifically focusing on young people from socially disadvantaged background.

Keywords: loneliness, adolescence, socially disadvantaged background

1 Introduction

Humans are social beings, they need other people in their life, they need to feel belonging and love, they need to be a part of different social groups. Yet, in the context of a very fast lifestyle of modern man, each of us is threatened by loneliness. It belongs to population global diseases of modern age. It represents an unwanted matter, reduces the quality of life, and while some people can handle this situation themselves, others need to seek professional help to deal with it. Loneliness threatens not only the standard life of individuals, but the functioning of society as a whole.

More and more attention is paid to issue of loneliness and its experiencing in adolescents. Adolescence is itself a challenging developmental period, adolescents often experience feelings of helplessness, insecurity, isolation, insignificance, or loneliness, and during this period they need to have an effective social network consisting of healthy supportive relationships around them. Their experiencing and consequently way of behaviour depend heavily on this. If a young person comes from a socially disadvantaged background, the whole developmental period is even more difficult for them.

2 Loneliness - a modern age disease?

Loneliness affects everyone, it troubles in a certain form and in certain life stages both young and old, married and single, rich and poor, educated or without education, sick or without health problems (Žiaková et al., 2008). Žitniaková Gurgová (2013) characterizes it as a subjective experience that results from our interpretation of events, a condition that is unpleasant to a person. And although, in the short term, loneliness can be positive (psycho hygiene) - it creates space to think about your life, about solving life situations, to recover strength, it helps to calm down, to find a way to yourself, to rest from other people, long-term loneliness affects people negatively, causes behavioural changes. Lichner (2018) classifies, for example, feelings of depressed mood, insecurity, shyness, social isolation, low self-esteem or anxiety to loneliness symptoms. Šarafín (2010) adds that this undesirable condition can escalate into more serious chronic problems, and it is therefore important to start tackling it in the early stages.

Solitude is not a bad condition, but loneliness can become one. The feeling of loneliness refers to our perception of relationships and it is not related to objective reality, whether we are part of a group, a class, a crowd, whether we are in long-term relationships or not. A lonely person considers his/her involvement in social relations to be weaker, unsatisfactory than he/she wishes. There are many people who, even if they live alone, do not feel loneliness intensely, and vice versa, there are many people who have organized relationships and experience loneliness to varying degrees (Žiaková et al., 2008; Müller de Morais, 2015). In this case, Nakonečný (2009) talks about the absence of an element of intimate sharing in relationships.

3 Experiencing loneliness in the context of adolescence and socially disadvantaged background

Adolescence is one of the developmental periods of the individual, during which the most significant changes occur, not only in biological (sexual maturation, changes in appearance ...), but also psychosocial (change of lifestyle, changes in interests, values, social status ...) area (Vágnerová, 2012). It shapes the identity of the adolescent (Erickson, 2015).

A young person tries to break away from his/her family and to integrate into society as an independent individual, seeking his/her own place in it. His/her self-appraisal and self-esteem are formed. He/she is trying different alternatives and is looking for the limits of his/her possibilities, so he/she sometimes behaves extremely. He/she thinks about life priorities, he/she has doubts about his/her own direction, gives importance to his/her own experiences, addresses existential questions. He/she is confronted with various unknown situations, loses his/her usual stereotypes, often lacks regular constructive communication. Separation from family, friends can lead to the absence of more intimate contacts and subsequent isolation, because even in this "detaching" period he/she needs to feel the support of the loved ones and the community. If he/she does not experience satisfying personal interactions, he/she does not have suitable social contacts, it may come to the feelings of loneliness and to loneliness deepening. Such long-term non-fulfillment of the needs of adolescents can lead to various negative phenomena such as health disorders, suicidal tendencies, self-harm, inappropriate sexual behaviour, aggression, committing crimes or various addictions. According to Tóthová and Žiaková (2019), eating disorders can also appear among adolescents, as well as their modern forms associated with alcohol use, current social demand for healthy eating, physical strength and attractiveness, loneliness, maladaptive coping with difficult situations, insufficient social support, social isolation, social exclusion.

If a young person comes from a socially disadvantaged background, the whole developmental period is even more challenging for him/her. The most common group in the Slovak Republic, which is socio-culturally disadvantaged and comes from a socially excluded community, is the Roma minority (Burkovičová, 2016). Roma are characterized by different ethnicity and the complex of factors, including cultural, linguistic, territorial, social, racial, and also their specific history, social origin and self-perception. Particular lifestyle and a lower standard of living dominates. (Hudecová, Papšo, Kurčíková, Seberíni, Vavrinčíková, 2012). These young people are living in excluded locations that are typical by lack of amenities, often in catastrophic living conditions. They often have lower qualification, resulting in more difficult succeeding in the labor market. They are characterized by increased morbidity. The life of adolescents from disadvantaged background is not easy, because as already mentioned, they often face poverty and social exclusion due to such background (Lukšík, Lemešová, 2013).

4 Selected empirical findings

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical concepts, the main objective of our research has been to investigate loneliness in a group of adolescents from socially disadvantaged background.

Using a quantitative approach, we have obtained data based on the anonymous questionnaire survey method. In the next section, we used a standardized questionnaire from authors De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (1999) called OESL, which was essentially focused on the specific experiencing loneliness of respondents. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions that

could be answered using the following options: "yes!", "yes", "more or less yes", "no", "no!". Based on these, invited respondents were could comment on these questions in the questionnaire. In case that the respondent thought that the statement reflects his/her feeling and attitude very well, he/she clearly marked "yes!". On the other hand, if the respondent strongly disagreed with the statement, he/she marked "no!". If the respondent was not quite sure and decided between the answers, he/she could choose between "yes", "more or less yes", "no" based on the feeling to which answer he/she inclined the most. For the statistical processing and evaluation of the questionnaire, we assigned specific values to selected answers, where a value of 1 was assigned to the answer "yes!", the value 2 to the answer "yes", the value 3 to "more or less yes", the value 4 to "no" and the value 5 to the answer "no!". In questionnaire, we have used questions that reflected social loneliness with the numerical expression: 1, 4, 7, 8 and 11. Questions with numerical expression: 2, 3, 5, 6, 9 and 10 represented emotional loneliness. The standardized questionnaire was supplemented by two questions of socio-demographic nature (gender, age). In our case, reliability reached a value of 0.676.

By a deliberate, non-random, occasional selection, we gathered a research sample consisting of 80 respondents aged from 16 to 18 years. Respondents come from a socially disadvantaged background. This sample of respondents attends the Secondary Vocational School in Kecerovce. Our research sample was represented by 30 men and 50 women.

The data were processed in the statistical software SPSS 16. Based on the normality test, we found out that it is necessary to use non-parametric statistics (Mann-Whitney U-Test).

We investigated whether adolescents coming from a socially dependent environment experience loneliness. For this purpose, we have calculated the gross score in the overall loneliness category. Results show that 43.8% of the respondents do not feel lonely, but up to 56.2% of the respondents are experiencing loneliness.

Tab. 1 Experiencing overall loneliness

Overall loneliness	f	%
Experiencing overall loneliness	45	56,2
Not experiencing overall loneliness	35	43,8

We also looked at how respondents experience emotional loneliness. After calculating the gross score in the emotional loneliness category, we found out that 56.2% of the respondents did not feel emotionally lonely, but up to 43.8% of the respondents felt lonely.

Tab.2 Experiencing emotional loneliness

Emotional loneliness	f	%
Experiencing emotional loneliness	35	43,8
Not experiencing emotional loneliness	45	56,2

In the context of how do adolescents experience social loneliness, we found out that up to 80% of respondents feel lonely, while 20% of respondents who do not feel lonely.

Tab.3 Experiencing social loneliness

Social loneliness	f	%
Experiencing social loneliness	64	80
Not experiencing social loneliness	16	20

We were wondering whether adolescents coming from socially disadvantaged background experienced more or less loneliness. Statistically significant differences have not been proved. Male

adolescents' responses indicate a trend of higher extent of experiencing loneliness than responses from female adolescents. However, the uneven distribution of the research sample in terms of gender perspective may influence results.

Tab.4 Overall loneliness from gender perspective

Gender	Number (N)	x̄	Z	p(α)
Male	22	32,55	-0,313	0,754
Female	58	31,28		

We were also interested in whether experiencing loneliness differs in relation to the age of the respondents. The research has been conducted in high school, we have set two age categories divided into those adolescents who were under the age of 17 and those who were older than 17 years old. Statistically significant differences have not been proven. Older adolescents' responses suggest a trend of higher rate of experiencing loneliness than responses of younger adolescents. However, the uneven distribution of the research sample in terms of age perspective, as well as the small age range of high school students may influence the results.

Tab. 5 Overall loneliness from age perspective

Age	Number (N)	x̄	Z	p(α)
Less than 17 years old	50	31,34	-0,405	0,686
More than 17 years old	30	32,10		

5 Recommendations for practice and conclusion

We consider it important to pay attention to the research of loneliness in a group of adolescents, especially those who come from a socially dependent background. Not only the theoretical background, but also empirical research point to this. Adolescence is a difficult period of life that has an almost existential character. The situation of adolescents coming from socially dependent background, where conditions for development and independence are heavily constrained, is even more difficult. Theoretical concepts suggest that experiencing loneliness in adolescence can lead to the occurrence of many negative phenomena, such as risk behaviour of adolescents.

Author's research findings indicate alarming results. More than half of high school students from a socially dependent background feel lonely overall. Almost half of the respondents are experiencing emotional loneliness and up to 80% of the respondents feel socially lonely. Other research findings are also interesting. Although no statistically significant differences have been proven, the respondents' answers indicate that male adolescents feel more lonely than female adolescents, as well as those who are over 17 years old, just prior to the end of secondary education.

Social worker as helping professional may act on this issue in both prevention and intervention levels. It seems necessary to introduce the concept of the school social work in our conditions. Especially in schools where most, if not all of the students come from socially disadvantaged background (as it is unfortunately the case in many allocated secondary vocational schools) and where there is higher risk of negative phenomena. Experiences with social work in the school environment from abroad confirm its positive impact on students. Among other things, it has been shown that school social work can reduce the risk factors that affect various negative phenomena in the school environment (Newsome et al., 2008, in: Vasiľová, Lovašová, 2018). The school social worker provides social counseling to students or their parents, can organize various preventive programs, socio-psychological training, support peer programs, organize discussions, cooperate with a family of student, and so on.

Social workers working with youth can be equally effective, for example in community or low-threshold centers, whether within different non-profit organizations or in the founding competence of specific communities, where excluded communities are located and so on. Known are several programs of mentoring, effective leisure time planning, youth exchanges, including international youth exchanges that offer young people new life perspectives.

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