VARIATIONS IN THE PERCEPTION OF LONELINESS BY SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

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Abstract

This work aimed to study solitude in a convenience sample of portuguese subjects in order to compare the values of sex, age, marital status and educational qualifications. For this purpose, we used the Differential Loneliness Scale for Non-Student Populations (Sermat & Schmidt, 1983) that was translated and adapted to our population. The data were treated statistically and tresults allowed us to conclude that marital status is the variable that best explains the sociodemographic loneliness, and the divorced group most affected by it.

INTRODUCTION

Solitude is, more than an objective situation, a state of mind. It tends to be negatively connoted to melancholy and depression, which are usually linked to sadness, a permanent buckling to oneself and isolation. Nowadays and in our societies it is mainly associated with the loss of bonds and social recognition in contexts in which, paradoxically, general physical isolation is not seen. Quite the contrary, cities - houses and public spaces - provide an almost promiscuous proximity to vital niches although rarely accompanied by personal closeness; hence the social importance and the anthropologic urgency of urban solitude problematic.

But what kind of solitude is this that stands at the core of the collective and seems to be inherent to it? What is the specificity of urban solitude? What other kinds of solitude may arise from the "world-city" to the "worldwide city"? The first, by humanity condensation, represents the world urbanization; the second expresses the meta- virtual city not built with concrete structures but based on immense and complex communication networks. The truth is that in the former situation, physical proximity, although breaking isolation, does generate isolation; in the latter situation, the possibility of a close worldwide contact coexists with the face-to-face cancellation.

Considering the vital contemporaneous impact of two sociological phenomena, we can not help thinking how they contribute to promoting and overcoming solitude as an anthropological and ethically negative occurrence, which socially erodes the intersubjective relationship and solidarity, comprising individual happiness, hope and self-esteem. We inevitably believe that the apparent increment of the negative solitude phenomena (as opposed, for example, to solitude sought for writers, artists and other philosophers in search of a creative and reflexive stimulus) is related to the decadence of the community standards of life, the expansion of individualism and the establishment of the so-called organic solidarity, according to Durkheim terminology. Individualism, a feature of mass-societies, would be responsible for the end of the mutual aid sense and reciprocal knowledge of pre-industrial communities, a cause for isolation oriented solitude. Nowadays, people would live together not because they identify themselves with one another, which would generate or assume feelings and attitudes of sharing, but because they would feel useful to each other, mainly in what concerns the protection assured by health, educational, recreational, police force and other institutions as well as by the easy access to consumption.

However, as Bauman Zygmunt (2003, pp.13, 14) states, community, by strengthening bonds of belonging, brings us safety in the same way as it deprives us from freedom, something, which does not happen to society. While the former generates a certain kind of slavery, the latter, due to its extreme individual expressions, leads us to abandonment, isolation, a "solitary coexistence" (idem, p.63), possibly deluded with collective life practises as demonstrations or other civil actions, or by integrating the so-called *aesthetic communities* around an idol, a song or a mobilizing cause.

It is in this context that the study of the relationship between the individual and the groups of belonging gains special relevance.

METHODOLOGY

The DLS - Differential Loneliness Scale for Non-Student Populations (Sermat & Schmidt, 1983) was applied to 217 random subjects in the district of Oporto, in order to compare the values obtained on sex, age, marital status and educational qualifications.

SAMPLE

Our sample comprises 217 residents in the district of Oporto, being 140 females and 77 males, with a mean age of 33.07 years and a standard deviation of 12.8 years. The average female age is 31.06 years and for men is 36.74 years. As regards to marital status, 107 subjects are single, 93 married, 11 divorced and widowed 6. Among the single, 77 are female and 30 male. Of the married, 54 are female and 39 male. The divorced, 5 are female and 6 male. As for the widows, 3 are female and 3 male.

Regarding qualifications, there is 1 illiterate subject, 24 with basic education, 30 with compulsory education, 70 with secondary education, 18 with technological courses, 65 undergraduate and 9 with postgraduate courses. Since the only illiterate is male; in basic education, 13 are female and 11 are male. In compulsory education, 13 are female

and 17 male. In secondary education, 46 are female and 24 male. In technological courses, 10 are female and 8 male. As for the graduates, 53 are female and 12 male. In the post-graduate studies, 5 are female and 4 male.

INSTRUMENT

The selected instrument was the DLS - Differential Loneliness Scale for Non-Student Populations, Sermat & Schmidt, 1983. This scale assesses the perceived lack or dissatisfaction with certain types of social relations, based on previous investigations (cf. Sermat, 1980), seems to contribute to the loneliness experience, also exploring some qualitative aspects of such relationships.

The definition behind DLS construction describes loneliness in terms of a subjective feeling of discrepancy between the types of relationships the individual perceives to have and those he would like to have (Sermat, 1980). So instead of asking the subject if he feels alone, the DLS asks how satisfied or dissatisfied he feels about a specific number of relationships.

The conceptual model of the DLS consists of two orthogonal dimensions: a relationship dimension and an interaction dimension, both in a 4 x 5 grid. In the definition of loneliness as relational deficit, for example, we can restrict the deficit to close interpersonal relationships, or extend it to include feelings of separation from a set of social relations, as Sadler (1975) proposed. DLS consists of four types of relationships: romantic and sexual relationships, friendships, family relationships and relationships with large groups or with the community.

DLS presents a type of measurement scale that differs from any other previously conceived as it questions to assess the quality and quantity of its own interactions in specific kinds of relationships.

This scale is also unique because, during its construction, the analysis of certain items was undertaken to reduce saturation of content due to depression, anxiety and self-esteem and minimize bias response of social desirability type. The scale reliability is high, with K-R 20s ranging from .90 to .92 and test-retest coefficients of .85 and .97 for males and females, respectively, for a period of 1 month.

RESULTS

Initially, an analysis of items was carried out with the following results: With regard to romantic and sexual relationships, 152 subjects (70%) currently have a meaningful romantic relationship, but there are differences in terms of age (F = 1, 497, df = 43, p. = 0 37). Moreover, the divorced and widowed people present more discordant responses than the married one (F = 8.005, df =3, p.=0.000). 139 subjects (64.1%) reported being currently involved in a romantic or marital relationship where both make a genuine effort to cooperate, though this is more true for single and married than for divorced or widowed people (F = 5.624, df = 3, p. = 0.001). 150 subjects (69.4%) think that it is hard to tell someone they like him / her. 162 subjects (74.7%) considered themselves important people in emotional well-being and physical development of their partners or husbands. The single, married and widowed are significantly considered more important in emotional well-being of lovers or spouses than divorced (F = 8.977, df = 3, p.= 0.000). 148 subjects (68.2%) have a boyfriend or spouse who meets many of their emotional needs. Married couples and single people feel more satisfied than the divorced and widowed (F = 12.866, df = 3, p. = 0.000). 163 subjects (75.1%) consider that, at present, have true compatibility in a romantic relationship or marriage. Women reported having fewer romantic relationships than men (F = 4.128, df = 1, p. = 0.043). Moreover, the divorced and widowed have less romantic relationships than single and married people (F = 5.226, df = 3, p. = 0.002). 155 subjects (71.8%) said their partners or husbands / wives give them much support and encouragement. Single and married people feel significantly more support from partners than the divorced and widowed (F = 11.920, df = 3, p. = 0.000). 181 subjects (83.4%) denied that people who say they are passionate about them are usually just "streamlining" to use them for their own purposes. The divorced men and widowers feel less than the single and married ones that someone falls in love with them (F = 0.36, df = 3, p. = 0.036). 185 subjects (85.3%) revealed that, in their relations, they usually felt at ease in expressing both positive and negative feelings. There are differences regarding age (F = 1.530, df = 43, p. = 0.030). 159 subjects (73.3%) said they had a special love relationship in which they feel truly understood. The divorced and widowers

have less emotional relationships in which they feel supported and understood (F = 9093, df = 3, p. = 0.000). 149 subjects (68.6%) reported having an active love life. Differences were found regarding age (F = 1.692, df = 43, p. = 0.010). Single, married or living with a partner have a love life more active than the divorced and widowed (F = 10.717, df = 3, p. = 0.000). 168 subjects in the sample (77.4%) tend to get along with their partner in romantic relationships. Single people and married couples get along much better with their partners than the divorced and widowed (F = 11.250, df = 3, p. = 0,000). 175 subjects (80.6%) consider that usually get the needed emotional security through a romantic or sexual relationship. The divorced are those who have more difficulties in getting emotional stability (F = 3.166; df = 3, p. = 0.025). Regarding family relations, 174 subjects in the sample (80.2%) find it easy to express feelings of affection for members of their families, being easier for women to express feelings of affection for the family rather than men (F = 5.861, df = 1, p = 0.16). 191 subjects (88.0%) claim to get on well with their family. 177 subjects (81.6%) denied feeling often shy or introverted among their family. 174 subjects (80.2%) felt that their families are people who really understand them. Divorced people feel significantly more misunderstood than the single, married or widowed (F = 3.341, df =3; p.= 0.020). 175 subjects (80.6%) believe that members of their families like to know their friends. 159 subjects in the sample (73.6%) do not consider that their relatives are often too busy with their concerns to bother with their problems. The divorced and widowed feel their families less available than the married and widowed (F = 2.806, df = 3, p. = 0.41). 186 subjects (86.1%) think that their family members give them the support they need. The divorced relate significantly less support from family than single, married or widowed (F = 3.394, df = 3, p. = 0.019). 176 subjects (81.1%) state they do not feel embarrassed with the way their families behave. The lower the school level is more people feel embarrassed about the behavior of their family (F = 3.502, df = 6, p. = 0.007). 187 subjects (86.2%) reported having a good relationship with most members of their families. Divorced people have a worst relationship with the family than the married and widowed. (F = 3.373; g.l. = 3, p. = 0.019). 146 subjects (67.3%) do not consider they have little to say to members of their families. 188 subjects

(86.6%) feel they really belong to a family. Divorced people feel significantly they belong less to a family than married, widowed and single people (F = 6090, df = 3, p = 0.001). 178 subjects (81.4%), generally feel that their family know their strengths and qualities. 181 subjects in the sample (83.4%) denied having little contact with members of their families. The divorced and widowed have less contact with family members than the married and single ones(F = 3.514, df = 3, p. = 0.016). 189 (87.5%) do not consider to avoid members of their families, whenever possible. 189 subjects (87.1%) believe their families value their opinions when making decisions as a family. 150 subjects (69.1%) feel that they are very open with the members of their families.

Regarding friendships, 163 subjects (75.1%) usually do not expect a friend to call and invite them before making plans to go somewhere. 176 subjects (81.1%) believe that most of their friends understand their motives and reasons. 198 subjects (91.7%) claim to have at least a good friend of the same sex. 188 subjects (86.6%) feel that some of their friends will remain by their side in most difficult situations. 141 subjects (65.0%) believe the effort to have friends and be loved is rewarded the way they would like it to be. 147 subjects in the sample (67.7%) feel they have enough friends in the city they live. 181 subjects (83.4%) feel they can lean on friends for help whenever is needed. 180 subjects of the sample (82.9%) have friends interested in what they do, but never interfering. 187 subjects (86.2%) allow themselves to become closer to their friends. 144 subjects (66.4%) do not feel that only a few friends understand them the way they want to be understood. 159 subjects (73.3%) deny that lately, many of their friendships have proved to be a disappointment. 163 subjects (75.1%) state they receive much help and support from friends. 170 subjects (78.3%) reported having some friends with whom they can talk without restrictions. 164 subjects (75.5%) claim to have some friends they can count on to meet the needs to establish mutual commitments. 191 subjects (87.3%) reported having at least one true friend. The single, married and widowed people responded more affirmatively than the divorced (F = 5.335, df = 3, p. = 0.001). 171 subjects in the sample (78.8%) consider that, not having moved so often, have no difficulties in keeping friendships over time. 172 subjects in the sample (79.3%) denied having difficulties in

inviting a friend. There are differences in what concerns age (F = 1.668, df = 43, p. =, 012). The divorced and widowed have more difficulties in inviting a friend than the married and single people (F = 4.699, df = 3, pg = 0.003). People with basic education and post-graduated show more difficulties in inviting a friend (F = 2.447, df = 6, p. = 0.026). 190 subjects (88%) do not consider their friends are not interested in them for too long. 185 subjects (86.0%) consider that most of their friends are truly concerned about their welfare.

With regard to community relations, 156 subjects (70.0%) think people in their communities are really interested in what they think or feel. 163 subjects (75.1%) do not think that anyone in their community might not be worried with them. 175 subjects (80.6%) believe that there are many people in their community who understand their points of view and their beliefs.

Regarding relations with the groups, 180 people (82.9%) do not consider most of the people around them strange, being married couples and single people those who show a deeper perception, opposite to the divorced and widowed (F = 3.547, df = 3, p = 0.15). 174 subjects in the sample (80.2%) think they work well in groups. 179 subjects (82.5%) say they get great satisfaction from the groups they belong to. There are differences regarding age (F = 1.773, df = 43, p. = 0.005).

Next, a factor analysis, conducted with *varimax* rotation, was carried out and items 15, 20, 40, 48 and 58 were excluded because they do not discriminate factors. These factors, as a whole, explain the variance of 54.227; while the first factor explains 13.838; factor 2 explains 4,486; factor 3 explains 2.378.

After establishing the factors, a comparative analysis (*ANOVA*) was undertaken respecting the sociodemographic variables (gender, age, marital status, qualifications).

There were significant differences in marital status with regard to Factor 1 (romantic relations), (F = 14.739, df = 3, p = 0.000) and Factor 2 (Family Relations), (F = 4.856, df = 3, p = 0.000): the divorced and widowed have less positive romantic relationships than single and married people or even any relationship. Divorced people have a significantly worst relationship with the family compared with those who are single, married or widowed.

The scale has a total average of 15.1196, the minimal value of 0.0 and the maximum value 58.00, the standard deviation is 11.21683. There are significant differences with regard to marital status on the total scale (F = 5.541, df = 3, p. = 0.001): overall, the divorced are those who feel more lonely, followed by widowers, married and, finally, single.

We performed a multiple linear regression, using the estimation method *stepwise* in order to assess which social demographic variables which mostly contributed to explain the value of the total scale. Tt was then found that only marital status explained the value (R²= 0.039, F = 8.310, df = 1, p = .004). We also showed that the items that have more weight or that better explain the value of the total scale are items 38 (*I do not get much satisfaction from groups I attend to*), 21 (*I have a boyfriend or partner who satisfies most of my emotional needs*) 19 (*I feel I can not turn to friends for help when I need*), 25 (m*y parents are often too busy with their concerns to bother with my problems*) and 54 (*I have little contact with members of my family*), 27 (*No one in my community worries about me*), 59 (*My family values my opinion when making family decisions*), 2 (*Most people around me are strange*); 49 (*I have no neighbor to help me in difficult times*) and 44 (*My family is too critical towards me*) (R²=, 0636, F = 140.413, df = 1, p = 0.000).

We also performed a multiple linear regression, to assess what the four factors contributed to more and better explanation of the full scale values. We note that the first factor to appear is factor 1 (*Romantic Relationships*); followed by factor 2 (*Family Relations*), followed by factor 3 (*Relationship with Friends*) (R ² = 0.995, F = 4080.881, df = 10, p. = 0.000).

As the value of Cronbach's alpha of the full scale is 0.936, we note that no items should be removed from the scale to the extent that the value does not increase when they are deleted, although items 15, 20, 40, 48 and 58 in the elaboration of factors having been deleted, in as much as they are not discriminatory.

When we conduct a multiple linear regression analysis to factor 1 (*Romantic Relationships*), we verify that the item 21 (*I have a boyfriend or spouse who meets many of my emotional needs*) is what has greater predictive power in the regression equation explaining most of the variance (R2 = 0.728, F = 572.189, df = 1, p. = 0.000).

Performing multiple regression analysis to factor 2 (*Family Relations*), we verify that item 54 (*I have little contact with members of my family*) is the one with greater predictive power in the regression equation explaining the majority of the variance (R^2 = 0.577, F = 290.806, df = 1, p. = 0.000).

We also analyzed the linear regression of factor 3 (*Relationship with Friends*) and verify that item 39 (*I get lots of help and support from friends*) is the one with greater predictive power in the regression equation explaining most of the variance (R^2 = 0.563, F = 268.810, df = 1, p. = 0.000).

We performed a multiple linear regression analysis on the factor 4 (*Relationship with the Community*) and verify that item 27 (*Nobody in my community is very concerned with me*) is what best predicts the factor (R^2 = 0.587, F = 304.490, df = 1, p. = 0.000), followed by items 56, 12 and 53.

Conclusion

With regard to sexual-romantic relationships, we found that most of the sample has rewarding affective relationships, in which is involved, and which brings pleasure and satisfaction. Regarding the differences between the sociodemographic variables, we found that the widowed and divorced are the subjects whose loneliness in this kind of relationship is most noted. Differences were also found in relation to age.

Regarding the relationship with family, most of the sample feels well with the family, feels close to it, is often with it, feels available for family and feels family available to them. However, divorced and widowed feel families less available, less comprehensive, spend less time with family and their sense of belonging to a family is smaller. It is curious that people with a lower education feel more ashamed of the behavior of their own family, than people with more education. Also it is nonetheless interesting that men have more difficulty in expressing affection with regard to the family.

As regards relations with friends, most of the sample has safe and satisfying friendships, they can count on. And once again, as regards the difference between the sociodemographic variables, marital status is the variable where more significant differences in what concerns loneliness is found - especially widows and divorcees feel more alone regarding their friends. The same applies to relations with the major groups.

Regarding relations with the community, there were no significant differences concerning sociodemographic variables, and most of the subjects feel integrated in it.

Overall, the divorced are those who feel most alone followed by widowed, married and, finally, by single people. Only marital status explains the value found for the total scale of loneliness.

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