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Keming Yang (2019)

Loneliness: A social problem

Routledge

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Sociologist Keming Yang examines in his book loneliness, an issue that has recently received considerable attention from researchers, policy-makers and the media. His main argument is that, while loneliness is still overwhelmingly understood as an individual-level psychological problem, it is actually a social problem. The prevalence of loneliness varies between ethnic groups, classes, cultures and societies and societal events like mass immigrations, large-scale social conflicts and economic crises increase loneliness. Loneliness is a social phenomenon as it is by definition about problems in social relations. Furthermore, Yang argues, loneliness is not merely a problem for the lonely but for the society as a whole. However, according to the author, there is a shortage of social science studies on loneliness and thus this book aims to start a round of sociological research on the topic. The book does not discuss care or caring but as loneliness can be seen to result from unmet socio-emotional needs, it is relevant to care research. Furthermore, as older people are one of the population groups mostly affected by loneliness, the issues raised up in the book have many repercussions for discussions on care.

The book presents and discusses the most usual definitions of loneliness, where loneliness is seen as an individual's negative experience of quantitatively or qualitatively deficient social relations. In addition to the absence of desired social relations, the book highlights the impact of the presence of undesirable ones. Yang shows the difference between loneliness and aloneness and defines solitude as chosen aloneness. He also provides other unique formulations like 'loneliness is when aloneness becomes painful' and 'loneliness is an emotional reaction to perceived social isolation'. The most usual measurements (the single-item question as well as the UCLA and de Jong Gierveld scales) of loneliness as well as the

growing body of evidence showing the connections between loneliness and health problems are also introduced. For example, the risk of the Alzheimer's disease has been found to be more than double among lonely people. However, Yang emphasizes that these connections must be understood as probabilistic rather than deterministic.

The author uses data especially from the European Social Survey to show the variations in the prevalence of loneliness between different European countries. The nation proves to predict loneliness more strongly than age or gender, for example. It is countries especially in Eastern and Southern Europe where loneliness is most typical. Yang concludes that 'loneliness is a problem for older people but the national context appears to have a much stronger impact'. At the same time, the book highlights that children and adolescents are also vulnerable to loneliness.

What makes Yang's book different from most sociological monographs is his regular use of poetry, novels and movies in illustrating and explicating his ideas and observations about loneliness. I found these illustrations refreshing, especially as the book is otherwise rather statistics-heavy – despite the author's original commitment to make the contents as accessible as possible. There are also many interesting and even poetic statements in the book like 'loneliness comes in many different sources and forms' and 'what loneliness does to the mind is what hunger and cancer do to the body'.

On the other hand, there are also some unnecessary or less well-formulated parts in the book. The author goes into a lengthy attack against *Going Solo* by Eric Klinenberg, which debate I found rather irrelevant for the book. A section on religious understandings of loneliness did not contribute much to seeing loneliness as a social problem, either. In the final chapter, Yang gives advice to lonely and other children and, while these tips are well-thought, there may not be many children among the readers of this sociological monograph. The worst single mistake of the book is a sentence that says that Hungary, Slovenia, Czech Republic and Poland used to members of the USSR. A number of typos also disturb reading.

Overall, this book brings a welcome sociological contribution to the booming loneliness literature. It starts important discussions on how societal issues like migration, ethnicity,

trust and unemployment are connected with loneliness. In further research, as Yang argues, it is also important to take into account the many types and multiple causes of loneliness as well as its variations along the dimensions of intensity, frequency and duration. Loneliness is a manifold social issue and calls for thorough analysis by social researchers.

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