

**The Social Production of Loneliness in an Age of Hyperindividualism****Meenakshi Verma<sup>1\*</sup> and Kanishka Yadav<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi<sup>2</sup> Student, Department of Psychology, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi\*Corresponding author: Meenakshi Verma ([mverma@ip.du.ac.in](mailto:mverma@ip.du.ac.in))**Abstract**

In contemporary society, the experience of loneliness is increasingly emerging as a collective psychological condition rather than an individual pathology. Amid rapid socio-economic transformation, neoliberal capitalist ideologies promoting hyperindividualism, self-optimisation, and competitive selfhood have contributed to the erosion of communal bonds and relational forms of living. This narrative review examines interdisciplinary literature across psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and philosophy to explore how structural shifts toward individualism shape the emotional landscape of loneliness and weaken social connectedness. It portrays loneliness as a socially produced phenomenon embedded within broader economic and cultural processes rather than merely a personal deficit. By integrating sociological critiques of neoliberalism with culturally informed approaches to mental health, the review addresses a critical gap in dominant psychological discourse which often prioritises individual coping over structural and relational dimensions of distress. The review argues that addressing contemporary loneliness requires a shift from individual-centred models of intervention toward community-based and culturally rooted frameworks of care for community building and social healing in an increasingly fragmented world.

**Keywords:** loneliness, neoliberalism, hyperindividualism, collective mental health, narrative review

**Introduction**

Loneliness has increasingly emerged as a significant public health and psychological concern across the world, yet it remains hidden due to the stigma surrounding discussions of loneliness (Killeen, 1998). In recent years, scholars across psychology, sociology, and public health have described contemporary societies as facing a “loneliness epidemic,” meanwhile others have referred to loneliness as a “hidden epidemic” of modern life to emphasise how contemporary social arrangements may undermine sustained interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging (Bound Alberti, 2018; Kehinde, 2024; Tiwari, 2013). Research across disciplines has demonstrated that chronic loneliness can have significant psychological and physiological consequences. Persistent loneliness has been associated with increased psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and can influence biological processes related to stress regulation, immune functioning, and overall health (Mushtaq et al., 2014; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). While loneliness has long been understood as a subjective emotional experience, its growing prevalence has led scholars to examine it not only as an individual psychological state but also as a broader social phenomenon linked to changing patterns of work, family life, technology, and community engagement.

In the Indian context, empirical research on loneliness remains comparatively limited, though available studies suggest that it is an emerging concern across multiple demographic groups. A systematic review of Indian studies reported considerable variation in prevalence rates but estimated that the pooled prevalence of loneliness across sampled populations was approximately 41%, with some studies reporting even higher levels depending on measurement scales and sample characteristics (Hossain, 2024). Evidence also indicates that loneliness affects individuals across the life span. Studies among adolescents and young adults have found that a substantial proportion of participants report elevated loneliness levels (Nayyar & Singh, 2011; Bhogle, 1991). Among older populations, survey-based research has shown that 13.4% of elderly individuals report frequent loneliness, with factors such as marital status, chronic illness, social participation, and physical activity significantly associated with these experiences (Srivastava & Srivastava, 2023). Prabha et al., (2016) found that as many as 62% adolescents are experiencing loneliness. These findings challenge the common assumption that loneliness primarily affects older adults and instead suggest that it is distributed across different stages of life.

Scholars increasingly link these experiences to broader transformations in social organisation. Rapid urbanisation, migration, and changing family structures have altered patterns of social interaction and community life. Urbanisation, often associated with economic opportunity and improved infrastructure, has also been described as a “two-edged sword” in terms of its implications for social well-being (Godfrey & Julien, 2005; Galea et al., 2005). While cities provide employment opportunities and greater access to services, they may simultaneously foster anonymity, social fragmentation, and psychological distress (Srivastava, 2009; Trivedi et al., 2008). These dynamics are particularly significant in India, where urban growth has accelerated rapidly over the past few decades. Approximately 30% of India’s population currently resides in urban areas, and this proportion is projected to increase substantially in the coming decades (United Nations, 2014). As individuals migrate to urban centres in search of employment and economic mobility, they may become physically and emotionally distanced from the familial and community networks that traditionally provided social support (Yadav et al., 2022). These demographic changes are closely intertwined with transformations in family structures and everyday patterns of social interaction. Migration for employment, the rise of nuclear households, and changing gender roles have reshaped traditional forms of social life. As a result, individuals may experience loneliness even within densely populated urban environments (Cacioppo et al., 2009). Demanding work schedules and limited leisure time in contemporary times may further reduce opportunities for sustained social engagement. Technological changes have also reshaped social relationships. Studies have shown that heavy internet use can sometimes lead to decreased social involvement and lower psychological well-being (Kraut et al., 1998; Yao & Zhong, 2014). Within urban environments where anonymity already characterises social life, these technological shifts may further contribute to experiences of disconnection and emotional isolation.

Despite growing recognition of loneliness as a widespread social concern, psychological research continues to frame it largely as an individual problem by focusing on maladaptive cognitions, deficits in social skills, and difficulties in emotional regulation, with interventions typically emphasising cognitive restructuring, social skills training, and increased social engagement. While such approaches may alleviate individual distress, critics argue that they reflect psychology’s broader tendency to individualise social problems. Sociological perspectives instead highlight how wider socio-economic transformations, such as increased mobility, precarious work, declining participation in community institutions, and digitally mediated interactions, have weakened communal bonds and produced more fragile forms of social connection. These limitations suggest the need to reconceptualise loneliness as a socially produced phenomenon embedded within structural, cultural, and economic contexts. This narrative review argues that contemporary experiences of loneliness are closely linked to the rise of hyper-individualistic norms and the erosion of communal ways of living, while alternative perspectives conceptualise the self as inherently relational and embedded within networks of collective life that focus on shared responsibility and dimensions such as spirituality and holistic well-being. By bringing these relational perspectives into dialogue with critiques of contemporary individualism, the paper seeks to contribute to rethinking loneliness and mental health in ways that prioritise social connectedness and collective well-being. The review first moves beyond individual psychological conceptualisations of loneliness, then examines how neoliberal processes produce and sustain individualism. It situates loneliness within the cultural context of modernising societies, and finally considers how sociological critiques can be integrated with relational frameworks to better understand loneliness.

**Method**

The literature included in this narrative review was identified through searches of multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, PsycINFO, PubMed, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected in order to capture interdisciplinary scholarship from psychology, sociology, and related social science fields. Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords such as loneliness, social isolation, individualism, community, urbanisation, modernity, neoliberalism, relational self, and India. Boolean operators were used to refine the search (e.g., loneliness AND individualism, loneliness AND urbanisation, relational self AND India) to identify studies that addressed loneliness both as an individual psychological experience and as a socially embedded phenomenon. No fixed time limits were imposed on the search in order to include both early theoretical formulations of loneliness and more recent empirical and conceptual contributions. Including foundational literature was important for examining how early psychological theories generally conceptualised loneliness primarily at the level of the individual, while later scholarship situated loneliness within broader social and structural transformations.

The review included a wide range of academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, review articles, and selected theses that contributed to theoretical or empirical discussions of loneliness, social isolation, and relational understandings of the self. Sources were included if they addressed loneliness in relation to psychological well-being, social organisation, or cultural context, where they engaged with themes such as individualism, community life, and social change. Studies focusing exclusively on narrowly clinical or biomedical aspects of loneliness without broader conceptual discussion were generally excluded. In addition to database searches, the reference lists of key articles and books were examined to identify further relevant literature. Through

these combined strategies, approximately eighty three sources were identified and reviewed. The selected literature was organised around three broad areas: psychological conceptualisations of loneliness, sociological analyses linking loneliness to processes of individualisation and social transformation, and relational perspectives on the self within Indian intellectual traditions.

### Discussion

This section synthesises the literature reviewed to examine how loneliness has been conceptualised across different theoretical traditions and disciplinary perspectives. While psychological research has provided insights into the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions of loneliness, much of this work has focused primarily on individual-level explanations. However, growing interdisciplinary scholarship suggests that loneliness is also shaped by broader social, economic, and cultural transformations. The following discussion therefore considers how structural forces which include neoliberal individualism, processes of modernisation, and changing social environments influence experiences of social disconnection. It also explores relational perspectives on the self as an alternative framework for understanding loneliness and rethinking its implications for mental well-being.

#### Conceptualising Loneliness Beyond Individual Psychology

Loneliness is widely conceptualised as the subjective perception of a gap between desired and actual social relationships, distinguishing it from mere aloneness or objective social isolation. It reflects the discrepancy between the level of social contact individuals desire and what they experience, and manifests across affective, cognitive, and behavioural domains. Individuals experiencing loneliness often report sadness, emptiness, and emotional disconnection, accompanied by cognitive patterns such as negative self-appraisals, social comparison, and perceptions of rejection. Situational events including bereavement, migration, relationship dissolution, or major life transitions may trigger loneliness, while personal characteristics such as personality traits, self-esteem, social competence, and early relational experiences influence vulnerability (Peplau & Perlman, 1979; 1981).

Several influential psychological theories explain how loneliness develops across the lifespan. Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby (1951), highlights the formative role of early relational experiences in shaping later interpersonal functioning. Secure attachments established in childhood provide a foundation for trust, emotional regulation, and the capacity to form meaningful relationships, whereas insecure attachment styles are associated with greater vulnerability to loneliness because they can disrupt individuals' ability to establish and maintain close bonds. Although attachment orientations may persist across the lifespan, later relational experiences can modify attachment security and influence loneliness trajectories. Another influential framework is Weiss's (1975) Social Needs Theory, which conceptualises loneliness as arising from the absence of specific types of relationships required to meet fundamental social needs. Weiss distinguished between emotional loneliness, resulting from the absence of intimate attachment figures such as romantic partners or close friends, and social loneliness, which stems from the lack of broader social networks and a sense of group belonging. This distinction highlights that loneliness is not a uniform experience but may emerge from different relational deficits. The Cognitive Discrepancy Theory of Loneliness, developed by Perlman and Peplau (1981), further emphasises subjective evaluation. According to this model, loneliness arises not simply from the absence of relationships but from the perceived mismatch between the relationships individuals desire and those they possess. Expectations, social comparisons, and interpretive processes therefore play a central role in shaping experiences of loneliness.

Beyond interpersonal and cognitive explanations, other theories highlight the adaptive and environmental dimensions of loneliness. The Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness proposed by Cacioppo and Hawkey (2008) conceptualises loneliness as an adaptive signal that evolved to alert individuals to social disconnection and motivate reconnection. When loneliness becomes chronic, this mechanism can generate maladaptive outcomes. Persistent loneliness has been associated with heightened vigilance to social threats, increased sensitivity to rejection, reduced trust in others, and behavioural withdrawal, which creates self-reinforcing cycles that intensify social disconnection. Complementing these psychological models, socioecological approaches situate loneliness within broader environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1977) conceptualises loneliness as emerging from interactions between individual characteristics and wider social contexts including family relationships, community structures, institutional environments, and social climates. Factors such as family conflict, social marginalisation, and exclusionary environments can increase vulnerability, while structural features of the built environment such as the loss of community spaces, limited public transport, or housing arrangements that discourage interaction may reduce opportunities for meaningful connection (Goldman et al., 2025). Qualitative research reinforces this multidimensional understanding. Narrative studies frequently describe loneliness as shaped by three interconnected dimensions: psychological distress and feelings of disconnection, interpersonal dynamics involving relational ruptures or unmet expectations, and broader contextual influences related to social and cultural environments. Participants often describe loneliness not simply as being alone but as lacking recognition, validation, and belonging even when surrounded by others.

Despite this recognition of relational and contextual influences, loneliness continues to be predominantly framed in psychological and policy discourse as an individual problem requiring individual solutions. Much of the literature focuses on modifying personal characteristics such as social skills, cognitive biases, or emotional regulation while paying comparatively less attention to the structural conditions that shape opportunities for connection. As a result, interventions frequently emphasise behavioural change rather than addressing the social environments that produce loneliness. Socioecological perspectives challenge individualised framing by suggesting that loneliness emerges through complex interactions between individual, relational, and societal factors, requiring multilayered interventions that address broader social systems (Barreto et al., 2024). Structural inequalities, discrimination, and unequal access to social resources may influence how loneliness is distributed across society, with intrapersonal vulnerabilities often activated by negative interpersonal experiences within these broader contexts (Verkuyten, 1998).

Cultural and contextual theories further highlight the role of societal norms and values in shaping experiences of loneliness. What constitutes meaningful connection, how loneliness is interpreted, and which relationships are prioritised vary across cultural settings. In some societies, loneliness may arise from perceived failure to fulfil family or community obligations (Cai et al., 2024; Garcia Diaz et al., 2019), whereas in others it may stem from emotional isolation or a sense of misalignment with dominant social norms (Heu, 2025). Moreover, many dominant theories of loneliness originate within Western psychological paradigms rooted in individualistic models of selfhood. Scholars have argued that this Western-centric perspective risks universalising experiences that may not adequately represent relational worldviews present in many non-Western societies (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Therefore, viewing loneliness solely as an individual deficit risks overlooking the social arrangements that structure opportunities for connection. Instead, loneliness may be more accurately understood as reflecting the weakening of relational structures that sustain belonging, mutual care, and community life.

#### Neoliberalism and the Production of Individualism

One influential framework for understanding these transformations is neoliberalism, a political and economic rationality that has significantly reshaped modern societies. Although often discussed primarily as an economic doctrine, scholars argue that neoliberalism also operates as a cultural and psychological system that reorganises subjectivity, social relationships, and everyday life. At its core, neoliberalism prioritises market logic as the primary mechanism for organising society, promotes policies such as deregulation, privatisation, fiscal discipline, and the expansion of competition across social institutions (Biebricher & Johnson, 2012). Within this framework, individuals are positioned as autonomous agents responsible for maximising their own well-being through rational choices in competitive environments. At the same time, neoliberal governance reshapes the relationship between the state, market, and individual by minimising collective responsibility (Leme, 2022). Individuals are increasingly expected to navigate social and economic challenges independently, relying on personal initiative rather than communal or institutional support.

A central feature of neoliberal ideology is responsibilisation – a process through which individuals are made responsible for their own life outcomes (Rose and Miller, 1992). Through institutional practices and cultural narratives, success and failure are interpreted primarily as the result of personal effort and decision-making (Althusser, 1971). Economic insecurity, unemployment, or poor health are thus reframed as individual shortcomings rather than structural problems. This shift transforms citizens into what scholars describe as “enterprising subjects,” individuals who view themselves as entrepreneurs of their own lives and are expected to continually enhance their productivity, skills, and market value. (Biebricher & Johnson, 2012). Such dynamics contribute to what scholars describe as hyperindividualism – an intensified emphasis on autonomy, self-reliance, and personal success that can weaken collective responsibility and social engagement (Huang et al., 2010).

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), community belonging rests on four interconnected dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to the sense of belonging individuals experience within a group, influence reflects the reciprocal impact members have on one another, integration and fulfillment of needs describe shared goals and mutual support within communities, and shared emotional connection emerges through collective experiences and social bonding. However, neoliberal cultural values, through its emphasis on independence,

competition, and individual achievement, can undermine these foundations of communal life. When societies increasingly reward personal success and productivity, individuals may invest less in community relationships, experience reduced relational influence within social networks, and share fewer collective goals. As social interactions become more transactional, the relational bonds that sustain belonging and mutual support may weaken over time (Chavis & McMillan, 1986).

Quantitative studies conducted across several Western countries have found that stronger perceptions of neoliberal social environments are associated with higher subjective loneliness and related health concerns (Becker et al., 2021). Qualitative studies also illustrate how neoliberal social contexts can aggravate experiences of isolation. Research examining migrants transitioning from collectivistic cultures to individualistic neoliberal societies shows that the emphasis on independence and self-reliance can produce profound feelings of social dislocation. Interviews with Afghan migrants in the United Kingdom, for example, revealed that individuals often struggled to adapt to environments where communal guidance and relational support were less accessible, resulting in heightened experiences of loneliness (Meloni, 2021). Structural transformations associated with neoliberal governance such as market-oriented housing policies, urban redevelopment, and processes such as gentrification have been linked to declining neighbourhood cohesion and reduced opportunities for sustained social interaction (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021). As public spaces and community institutions diminish, individuals may encounter fewer opportunities for meaningful social engagement and collective belonging.

These transformations are reinforced by cultural shifts toward consumerism and productivity-oriented identities. Within neoliberal societies, personal worth increasingly becomes tied to measurable achievements such as income, professional success, or visible accomplishments. Individuals are encouraged to evaluate themselves according to metrics of performance and efficiency, internalising expectations that they must constantly enhance their market value. In digital environments, individuals engage in “personal branding” to curate identities designed to increase their visibility and desirability in competitive social and professional spaces. According to The Interaction of Person–Affect–Cognition–Execution (I-PACE) model, behaviour emerges through interactions between individual predispositions, emotional responses, cognitive evaluations, and decision-making processes (Brand et al., 2016). Research suggests that increased social media use can intensify upward social comparison and materialistic aspirations, particularly among younger populations (Hu & Liu, 2020). When individuals repeatedly compare their lives with curated representations of others’ achievements online, feelings of inadequacy and disconnection may increase. Individuals experiencing loneliness are more likely to develop problematic forms of social media engagement and consumer behaviour, including impulse buying and emotional attachment to brands (Nikolinakou et al., 2024; Pieters, 2013). These dynamics show how loneliness can become embedded within consumer cultures that encourage individuals to seek emotional fulfillment through consumption rather than sustained social relationships.

Classical social theory offers insight into structural inequalities within neoliberal systems through the concept of alienation. Capitalist systems can separate individuals from meaningful participation in collective life, which may produce experiences of social estrangement and powerlessness (Marx & Engels, 1988). Contemporary scholars suggest that neoliberal governance extends these dynamics by emphasising self-reliance while simultaneously reducing access to collective welfare systems and social supports (Lampropoulos et al., 2023). When individuals encounter unemployment, illness, or economic insecurity within such systems, these challenges are frequently interpreted as personal failures rather than structural constraints. This process can produce feelings of stigma, diminished social value, and withdrawal from social relationships. Empirical research demonstrates that experiences such as unemployment and stigma are associated with stronger perceptions of being a burden to others, which in turn relate to lower well-being and life satisfaction (Lampropoulos et al., 2023). Emerging forms of precarious labour within neoliberal economies, such as gig and platform work, have been associated with increased feelings of powerlessness and loneliness compared to traditional employment arrangements (Glavin et al., 2021). In such contexts, individuals may experience what philosophers describe as ethical loneliness, a condition in which people feel abandoned or ignored by the social and institutional systems expected to support them (Abdulle, 2024; Stauffer, 2015).

By promoting hyperindividualism, responsabilisation, and the marketisation of social life, neoliberalism reorganises the conditions under which relationships are formed and sustained. As communal institutions weaken and individuals become increasingly responsible for managing their own socio-economic survival, opportunities for stable social connection may diminish. Understanding loneliness within this structural framework allows it to be interpreted as a social phenomenon rooted in the transformation of contemporary societies, instead of an individual problem.

#### **Cultural Context: Loneliness in Modernising Societies**

Psychological experiences of isolation are shaped by the norms, expectations, and social structures that organise everyday life. Cultural psychologists have long argued that social, cultural, and environmental forces significantly influence how individuals experience and interpret loneliness (Rokach, 2024). The culture one belongs to, the community in which one lives, and the relational norms governing social interaction all shape the meaning of belonging and connection. One of the most significant developments shaping contemporary experiences of loneliness is the rapid transformation of social life in modernising societies. Globalisation has expanded economic mobility and cross-cultural interaction, but it has also disrupted traditional forms of community and belonging. Sociological analyses suggest that while globalisation increases global connectivity, it can simultaneously weaken localised social ties, producing new forms of disconnection and alienation (Balapashev et al., 2023). In large metropolitan environments, identities and relationships are continually renegotiated as individuals move across geographical, occupational, and cultural boundaries. Such transitions often generate a sense of instability or rootlessness, especially for individuals who migrate for education or employment and must rebuild social networks in unfamiliar environments.

Relocation often disrupts established kinship networks and social support systems, increasing vulnerability to emotional distress and social isolation, thus playing a significant role in shaping loneliness (Rokach, 2024). When individuals enter new cultural contexts, differences in language, social norms, and expectations may complicate integration into local communities. Research on immigrant populations shows that a strong sense of belonging and participation in community life can significantly reduce loneliness (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). Individuals who struggle to form meaningful relationships in new environments may experience persistent feelings of social displacement, especially within globalised labour markets where geographic mobility and relocation are normalised features of education and employment.

Cultural orientation also shapes how loneliness is experienced and interpreted. Cross-cultural research has consistently demonstrated that loneliness varies across collectivist and individualistic societies. Individualistic cultures emphasise autonomy, personal achievement, and self-expression, whereas collectivist cultures prioritise interdependence, relational harmony, and group belonging (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In collectivist cultures, individuals typically view themselves as embedded within networks of family and community. Social identity is closely tied to relational roles and responsibilities, and maintaining interpersonal harmony is often prioritised. Social relationships serve as an important buffer against loneliness. At the same time, collectivist societies can produce unique forms of loneliness when expected social bonds are absent. Because family and community connections are culturally emphasised, the disruption of these relationships may generate particularly strong experiences of isolation (Lykes & Kimmelmeier, 2014). In contrast, loneliness in individualistic cultures is often associated more narrowly with the absence of close friendships or intimate relationships rather than broader community belonging. Empirical evidence suggests that individualistic cultural environments may intensify experiences of loneliness. A large cross-cultural study found higher levels of loneliness in societies characterised by stronger individualistic values. Individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on independence and personal responsibility, which may reduce reliance on collective support systems. In such contexts, individuals are often expected to manage emotional difficulties independently, potentially intensifying feelings of social isolation (Barreto et al., 2021).

These global transformations are particularly visible in contemporary India, where rapid economic development and urbanisation have significantly altered traditional social structures. Historically, Indian society was characterised by dense kinship networks, joint family systems, and strong neighbourhood relationships that fostered everyday social interaction and collective participation. Shared cultural practices such as communal celebrations, extended family gatherings, and collective leisure activities helped sustain close social networks (Sonawat, 2001). These relational structures often functioned as protective mechanisms against prolonged loneliness by embedding individuals within supportive social communities. However, the growing prevalence of nuclear families has transformed domestic life by reducing everyday interactions between extended kin and weakening intergenerational ties. While nuclear households provide greater autonomy and mobility, they often limit opportunities for informal social support within family networks. Migration associated with education and employment has also become a defining feature of contemporary Indian youth. Many young adults relocate from smaller towns and rural areas to urban centres in pursuit of higher education and professional opportunities. While such mobility can create economic advancement, it also separates individuals from established social networks and familiar cultural environments (Pandit, 2020). Adjusting to new urban contexts often requires navigating linguistic, cultural, and social differences that can complicate the formation of meaningful relationships.

Digital technologies and changing patterns of leisure also shape contemporary experiences of loneliness. Although social media and online communication allow individuals to maintain contact across distance, they can also replace face-to-face interaction and encourage more superficial forms of

engagement (Balapashev et al., 2023). Research suggests that heavy reliance on digital communication may reduce participation in offline social activities, potentially intensifying feelings of isolation despite constant virtual connectivity. Globalisation, migration, urbanisation, and digitalisation are reshaping the ways individuals relate to one another and participate in social life. In societies such as India, where relational traditions historically emphasised interdependence and collective belonging, these shifts represent significant cultural transitions. As communal networks weaken and individual autonomy becomes increasingly prioritised, loneliness appears less as a personal deficit and more as a reflection of broader social change.

### **Integrating Sociological Critique and Indian Knowledge**

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship suggests that loneliness is better understood as a product of structural individualism combined with the erosion of relational frameworks that historically sustained collective belonging. Reframing loneliness in this way requires integrating sociological critiques of neoliberalism with culturally grounded and community-based approaches to mental health. The dominance of individual-centred explanations of psychological distress is deeply embedded within the historical development of modern psychology. From its early formulation, clinical psychology was defined as the study of individuals with the aim of promoting behavioural or psychological change at the level of the person (Compas & Gotlib, 2002). Major theoretical traditions, from psychoanalysis to behaviourism and contemporary cognitive-behavioural therapies, have largely focused on intrapsychic processes and individual functioning (Routh, 2010). While these approaches have generated important insights, they have also tended to marginalise broader conceptualisations of distress that foreground familial, social, and political contexts. Rhodes and Langtiw (2018) describe this emphasis on individualism as a form of disciplinary “habitus” within psychology, shaping how psychological problems are conceptualised and addressed. When distress is interpreted primarily as individual pathology, the wider structural conditions that produce alienation and disconnection often remain invisible, indirectly protecting the status quo.

Community psychology emerged in the mid-twentieth century partly in response to these limitations. Dissatisfied with an overly individualistic approach to mental health, scholars in this field developed frameworks that address the social determinants of psychological well-being. Foundational work in community psychology emphasised ecological analysis, empowerment, cultural diversity, and social justice as central principles for understanding mental health challenges (Rappaport, 1977; Levine & Perkins, 1997; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). From this perspective, psychological distress cannot be separated from the social environments in which individuals live. Experiences such as depression, anxiety, or loneliness may therefore be understood as reflections of marginalisation, social disadvantage, or weakened community structures (Prilleltensky, 1997; Macleod, 2004). These approaches encourage a shift from interventions that focus solely on individual treatment toward strategies aimed at transforming the relational contexts that shape everyday life. Empirical research supports the importance of community-level engagement in addressing loneliness. Qualitative research exploring older adults’ experiences of loneliness demonstrates that the absence of meaningful social connections is often experienced as a profound sense of disconnection from the wider world. In a study examining older adults’ experiences of loneliness, participants emphasised the importance of meaningful friendships and social contact in maintaining emotional well-being (Barke, 2017). Loneliness was described as the loss of relational engagement with others and with community life. Life transitions such as retirement, bereavement, or the loss of daily social interactions previously provided through work were frequently identified as moments of heightened vulnerability to loneliness (Barke, 2017). Participants also highlighted the importance of community engagement, volunteering, and local social groups in helping rebuild social connections and maintain a sense of purpose. These findings suggest that loneliness is closely tied to opportunities for relational participation within everyday social environments.

Evidence from community-based intervention research similarly highlights the importance of relational infrastructures. A systematic review of community interventions designed to reduce loneliness among older adults found that successful initiatives consistently created opportunities for social engagement, new relationships, and a sense of belonging within the wider community. Interventions ranged from befriending services and volunteer visiting programmes to group activities and community initiatives. Across studies, participants reported that loneliness decreased through increased social contact and the development of meaningful and reciprocal relationships. Programmes that enabled individuals to build new social networks and experience belonging within their communities were particularly effective (Noone & Yang, 2021). These findings indicate that the relational experiences generated through participation, such as companionship, mutual support, and shared activity, play a central role in alleviating loneliness.

In India, where significant gaps exist between the demand for mental health services and the availability of trained professionals, community-driven strategies have emerged as important mechanisms for expanding access to care. Programs based on task-sharing and community participation train local workers, volunteers, and peer supporters to provide psychosocial support and facilitate access to mental health services. Initiatives such as the Ashagram programme in Madhya Pradesh mobilise community members to assist in early identification of mental health problems, support rehabilitation, and facilitate social reintegration (Gautam & Bansal, 2014). Peer support initiatives within public mental health systems likewise demonstrate the potential of recovery-oriented relationships grounded in shared lived experience (Pathare et al., 2018). Such approaches align with insights from Indigenous and culturally grounded models of healing that emphasise relationality and collective participation. Scholars examining Indigenous therapeutic traditions note that many non-Western healing practices conceptualise well-being as emerging from the restoration of relational balance between individuals, communities, and spiritual worlds (Gone, 2016). Healing in these contexts often occurs through communal rituals, storytelling, shared meaning-making, and collective responsibility rather than solely through individual clinical treatment. These traditions challenge the assumption that psychological recovery must occur within the private space of the therapy room and instead emphasise the role of community in sustaining emotional and social well-being.

Research by Jain and Tomar (2025) highlights spirituality as an important resource for coping with loneliness among young people. Participants described spirituality as a deeply personal process that fosters inner peace, emotional regulation, and self-awareness through practices such as meditation, chanting, temple visits, and devotional recitations. Many distinguished loneliness from solitude, viewing the latter as a meaningful space for reflection and growth. Spirituality was also experienced relationally, creating a sense of connection to the self, the divine, and spiritual communities. These findings suggest that spirituality can function as a relational and communal resource that mitigates loneliness. Lai (2024) noted that yoga may be particularly effective in reducing systemic inflammation compared to conventional or mindfulness-based psychotherapies. From a psychoneuroimmunological perspective, because heightened inflammation is associated with loneliness, yoga may also help alleviate loneliness through its anti-inflammatory effects. According to Panigrahi et al (2023), the integrated approach of yoga therapy views psychosomatic distress as arising from imbalances across multiple layers of human existence. Here, disturbances in mental patterns, emotional responses, and life forces interact across the five koshas, and affect overall well-being. By combining stimulation, relaxation, and practices aimed at mastery over the mind, yoga seeks to restore balance and harmony across these layers. Such integration can strengthen resilience, enhance mental tranquillity, and help reduce loneliness. Spirituality has long functioned as a meaningful coping framework within Indian cultural contexts, offering individuals ways to interpret and manage distress arising from loss, trauma, or illness. Teachings in Hindu and Buddhist traditions that emphasise impermanence and acceptance can help individuals approach suffering with greater equanimity and meaning (Gawain, 2002). Empirical research further suggests that spiritual engagement can promote resilience, hope, and healthier coping strategies, particularly among individuals dealing with chronic stress or illness (Baldacchino & Draper, 2001; Narayanasamy, 2002). At the same time, scholars caution that spirituality may sometimes produce guilt, shame, or avoidance through phenomena such as spiritual bypassing, highlighting the need for balanced integration with psychological interventions (Pargament et al., 2000; Welwood, 2002). Integrative perspectives that combine spirituality with psychological frameworks have therefore been increasingly emphasised in contemporary mental health research (Kumar and Kumari, 2024).

Sociological critiques of neoliberal individualism, community psychology frameworks, and community-based interventions all converge in emphasising the relational foundations of well-being. Insights from Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions reinforce this view by conceptualising the self as inherently embedded within networks of relationships, communities, and broader existential or spiritual connections. Practices such as yoga, meditation, and communal spiritual engagement demonstrate how emotional well-being can be cultivated through restoring balance across relational and psychological dimensions of life. Integrating these perspectives therefore broadens contemporary understandings of loneliness, and suggests that meaningful responses must move beyond individual treatment toward rebuilding relational environments that sustain belonging, connection, and collective care.

### **Conclusion**

Loneliness is often framed as an individual emotional experience, yet this review shows that it is shaped by broader social and structural transformations. Processes such as urbanisation, mobility, and digitalisation have altered everyday relationships, weakening stable networks of belonging. These shifts are closely tied to neoliberal ideologies that emphasise competition, productivity, and individual self-responsibility, causing emotional struggles like loneliness to be interpreted as private problems rather than collective concerns. Psychological research has sometimes reinforced this focus by explaining loneliness primarily through individual traits or cognitive patterns, overlooking the social contexts in which it emerges. In contrast, relational perspectives in many Indian philosophical

traditions highlight interconnectedness and the embeddedness of individuals within families and communities. From this perspective, addressing loneliness requires moving beyond the isolated self toward rebuilding social bonds and communities of care.

### Implications for Research and Practice

The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that contemporary experiences of loneliness cannot be fully understood through purely individual-level explanations. Reintroducing such a sociological imagination into psychological research is therefore essential for understanding loneliness as a socially produced phenomenon rather than merely a personal deficit. These insights carry important implications for mental health practice. Although traditional cognitive-behavioural approaches have shown some effectiveness, interventions targeting loneliness often produce modest results and may fail to address the relational contexts in which loneliness occurs. Evidence suggests that community-based initiatives such as group art programs, exercise groups, or collective writing activities can increase social participation, foster friendships, and strengthen a sense of belonging among individuals experiencing isolation. Future research should therefore examine how broader social transformations including labour precarity, geographic mobility, digitalisation, and changing family structures reshape patterns of social belonging. Cross-cultural research may also provide insight into how different cultural models of selfhood influence vulnerability to loneliness. Integrating sociological perspectives with culturally grounded approaches to mental health may therefore offer more holistic pathways for fostering social connection and collective flourishing in contemporary societies.

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