

Isolation: Driving Society to Extremes

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As society has become more technologically driven, virtual lives are created, relationships are formed, and more often than not, individuals become emotionally and socially isolated from each other.

People live their virtual lives and are unable to meet the dynamic needs that are innate to all humans. We are social animals and our brains are biologically not equipped to live healthy, happy, successful lives in absence of each other. In fact, isolation is very dangerous and could be a central factor in what is behind the recent increase in joining extreme movements.

While there is no perfect society, culture, or country, one thing is certain; some countries have higher levels of societal isolation than others. While virtual relationships are the reference point for this article, it is not to say they are the cause of isolation, but rather a solution to the isolation individuals are experiencing.

In an earlier article published in [Psychology Today](#), [Ray Williams](#) explains the need for human touch and personal interaction. In societies where there is a significant lack of in person relationships, alternative social solutions will be utilized.

Many readers may be familiar with the famous saying by Orson Welles, “We’re born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for a moment that we are not alone.”

Welles passed away in 1989, but his words echo to this day.

Webster’s definition of “alone” is, “without anyone or anything.” Orson Welles’s saying is not only false, it is dangerous – and one could stand to argue that it is also backwards. We are not born alone, we do not live alone and most of us do not die alone. It’s only through illusion that we believe we are alone.

Yet in our very busy virtual lives, we lose the ability to communicate with others the way our brain was designed. The research conducted by Hari and Kujala (2009) allowed the creation of an excellent [schematic presentation](#) of the brain’s social function of face detection, gaze, expression, face identification, and object recognition (Brain Basis of Human Social Interaction: From Concepts to Brain Imaging, 2009).

Electronic communication removes the humanness of the relationship; the ability to recognize, express, interpret and respond appropriately to another’s emotions, allowing for one’s reality to be created by perception.

Because of the times we live in, virtual relationships are the most common form of relationship and because relationship types have not begun to trend towards a balance of virtual and conventional, it is reasonable to believe virtual relationships must provide some level of intimacy.

Social Exclusion

Scott, Mottarella, and Loovey (2006) conducted a study examining the levels of intimacy between “face-to-face and



computer mediated or virtual romantic relationships.” Scott’s findings showed significantly lower intimacy scores even when virtual relationships utilized computer based programs allowing for face time. Therefore, eventually the lack of intimacy will be noticed by one or more individuals, which could result in the relationship’s demise.

Can the lack of conventional relationships, impact one’s emotional and social development? If one’s emotional and social experience is limited to virtual relationships, could this predispose them to perceived or definitive social exclusion? Does the lack of conventional relationships prevent us from gaining tools and skills that assist us in combating antisocial behavior by allowing us to navigate complex life scenarios?

Social exclusion can occur with virtual relationships just as easily as it can with conventional relationships.

At the moment an individual perceives exclusion, the individual will question the motives of others involved and reflect on the situation as a whole (Bolling, Pitskel, Deen, Crowley, McPartland, Mayes, & Pelphrey, 2010).

Anti-Social Behavior

Because the experience of social exclusion severs emotional and cognitive pathways, the ability to control impulsive decisions and emotion regulation are hindered. One’s ability to process the realization to creating a decision that may result in antisocial behavior, can be relatively quick (Bolling, et al.).

However, studies have shown that antisocial behavior is progressive (De Becker, 1997).

Antisocial behavior can consist of non-violent behavior such as allowing one’s academic or professional performance to deteriorate; however, it can also lead to violence. Triggers for antisocial behavior vary based on life cycles and varying influences. The need to belong is innate and will drive individuals to search out others who share common beliefs. Where do individuals go to meet people? Online.

With news media and social media teaming with information on a variety of extremist causes or groups, it is not difficult for individuals to find propaganda.

This is one of the many tools used for coercion, the process by which individuals come to adopt extreme views or ideas that go against the norms of society. Individuals that regularly review online extremist propaganda can self-radicalize by identifying with all or a portion of the group’s message and/or their interpretation of the message.

In addition to the threat of at risk individuals being recruited into extremist groups, is the risk of vulnerable individuals being motivated or inspired by extremist groups to carry out acts of violence.

Triggers

Triggers of at risk and vulnerability differ depending on life stages. Unfortunately, because triggers are different and occur at different ages, paired with the gap between preventive services and law enforcement consequences, there is a lack of documented warning signs.

In addition, the lack of preventive services perpetuates the problem, prevents behavioral research and education for the public and professionals, while strengthening the structural conditions to perpetuate the all-time high of domestic and international extremism. NBC News reported a 35% increase in world-wide terrorist attacks (June 19, 2015).

It can be argued the individuals at risk for extremist influence and/or violence could be considered victims because the intent to join or act on behalf of an extremist group is not present at the onset of coercion. The intent to belong and the lack of emotional regulation or rational thought are the key drivers. Perpetrators prey on the vulnerable and manipulate them for their benefit.

Who is at risk? The majority at risk are youths and young adults who perceive their social and contextual influences

as unfair or are not “playing by the rules.” Remember, it is the perceived unfairness or “rule breaking behavior” by at risk individuals. It does not matter if individuals are having virtual or conventional relationships. While the majority of at risk individuals are youths and young adults, adults of all ages are not immune to triggers resulting in at risk behavior.

Currently, there are no organizations that act as a safety net to guard against individuals who are at risk of antisocial behavior. Preventive organizations would need to offer mental health and social services to help (re)integrate the victims into society. Law enforcement would need to be trained to understand the development of such behavior and assist in the preventive process.

In order to correct the societal issue, all sectors must come together to create preventive programs and services in an effort to protect at risk individuals. It is not just the responsibility of one sector in society, but of all sectors in society, including social services, law enforcement, human rights agencies and families. We can accomplish much more together than we can alone.

In closing, an abbreviated version of a poem from Maya Angelou entitled, “Alone” is most appropriate.

“Lying, thinking last night, how to find my soul a home, where water is not thirsty, and bread loaf is not stone, I came up with one thing, and I don’t believe I am wrong, that nobody, but nobody, can make it out here alone.”

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