

# Fromm-Reichmann's (1959/1990) *Real Loneliness* in the Contemporary United States

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## Abstract

In recent years, researchers have noted higher levels of loneliness among younger generations in the United States compared to Europe and Asia, and last year, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory about the nation's loneliness epidemic. Sixty-five years ago, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann published a groundbreaking paper on the topic of *real loneliness*—which she described as uncommunicable, characterized by a high degree of experiential avoidance, and central in the etiology of psychopathology. Today, that conceptualization seems more relevant than ever and may be helpful for understanding the national differences in loneliness. To supplement Fromm-Reichmann's recommendation to account for developmental history in real loneliness, in this article, I submit that a broader and deeper understanding of macro- and chronosystemic dimensions also is needed. I validate contextual factors that play into loneliness in the contemporary United States which are already discussed in the literature. Then I explore additional ones—technocracy and cultural disconnection, competitiveness at the expense of cooperation, and, consequently, psychological polarization.

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Last year, the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General (2023) declared loneliness a public health crisis. Although loneliness generally transcends demographics and geographics, historically it has been associated mostly with older adults. However, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, for the first time, younger people are lonelier (Malli et al., 2023) and, concurrently, experiencing more mental health issues (Berger, 2023). Meanwhile, U.S. emerging adults (Buecker et al., 2021) and middle-aged adults (Infurna et al., 2024) are lonelier than those in Europe and Asia. How can we make sense of these disparities?

**Fromm-Reichmann's Real Loneliness**

The foundation for a response appears in Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's (1959/1990) groundbreaking paper on *real loneliness*, "the uncommunicable, private experience of severe loneliness" (p. 305) accompanied by profuse experiential avoidance (pp. 310, 315). Real loneliness is "nonconstructive if not disintegrative" (p. 308) and plays an "essential role" in understanding psychopathology (p. 329). Importantly, Fromm-Reichmann distinguished real loneliness from alienation characteristic of the mid-20th century U.S. zeitgeist from which humanistic psychology arose.<sup>1</sup> Although un verbalized (à la Simon and Garfunkel's 1965 "The Sounds of Silence"), culturally-determined loneliness is nonetheless communicable (p. 305). On the contrary, for many today, the experience of loneliness is impossible to share (Malli et al., 2023). Furthermore, in *The Lonely American*, Olds and Schwartz (2009) identified a collective pathology whereby people stay busy (experiential avoidance) to avoid seeming lonely but ultimately feel lonelier because they have inadequate time to maintain relationships. Thus, to supplement Fromm-Reichmann's recommendation to account for developmental history in real loneliness, an understanding of macro- and chronosystemic dimensions also is needed.

**What's Happening in the United States Today?**

Buecker et al. (2021) and Infurna et al. (2024) attributed U.S. loneliness to fragmented social networks stemming from greater mobility. The latter added

social media use,<sup>2</sup> political polarization, and social and economic inequities/inequalities that pose barriers to living in accordance with one's values. These contextual factors match the experiences of my clients and students during the last decade—and I offer further interrelated issues.

### *Technocracy and Cultural Disconnection*

Schneider (2019) cautioned against technocracy “breaking souls” (p. 36) by replacing intimacy's messiness with a “machine model for living” that emphasizes image over substance (p. 62) and reinforces “packaged, programmed, and businesslike” interactions (p. 46). From the beginning of life, the stage is set for real loneliness. The displacement of natural birth by medicalized procedures that are uniquely prevalent in the United States interferes with early attachment bonds (Maté, 2022). Echoing Fromm-Reichmann's observation about the role of parents' fear of intimacy in real loneliness (p. 310) are intergenerational transmission of *fantasy bonds* in the absence of secure attachment (Firestone, 2024) and in the face of work-first culture (Levs, 2015)—both of which perpetuate hypermasculinity. Ruggedly individualistic parenting practices ultimately foster dependency (Miller & Commons, 2010) while lawnmower parenting begets hyper-vulnerability and aversion to healthy challenge (Weidman, 2022). Near-absence of rites of passage precludes community feeling (Burrow, 2023). Meanwhile, a “corroding feeling of estrangement” accompanies ubiquitous automation (Moustakas, 1961, p. 25) and breakdown of local communities supplanted by corporations and online shopping (Maté, 2022). As individuals retreat further into their silos, whereas being neighborly used to mean visiting people, now it means not bothering them (Olds & Schwartz, 2009). Accordingly, authentic encounters slip into transactional ones (Moustakas, 1961).

### *Competitiveness at the Expense of Cooperation*

Reflecting on *capitalist life syndrome* (Vos, 2020) in the United States, Olds and Schwartz (2009) observed that “initially, the sheer hardship of building a life in a new land enforced a balance between individualism and interdependence”; however, “as life got easier, the balance did not hold” (p. 9). For Fromm-Reichmann's generation, cultural values of “Calvinism, capitalism, and competitiveness” (p. 29) generated unrealistic perfectionism, hyper-conscientiousness, and sacrifice of ideals and identity (Bühler, 1969). Today, that self-alienation has deteriorated into other-alienation. Being “the only people in the world who believe that each individual has the right and the capacity to fit whatever [they] want into one small life” (Olds & Schwartz, 2009, p. 18),

in striving to stay afloat and get ahead, Americans tend to neglect relationships (Maté, 2022).

### **Psychological (Beyond Political) Polarization**

That neglect also begets irrational acquisitiveness. Prior to the pandemic, it had spurred emphasis on status at the expense of likeability (Prinstein, 2017), false bifurcation of competition and cooperation (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015), indifference (Schneider, 2019), and intolerance of difference (Schneider, 2013, 2023). During the pandemic, fractures in the system became exposed and cracked open. Then, with increased isolation, individuals became more set in their ways (Olds & Schwartz, 2009) and *psychological polarization*<sup>3</sup> intensified.

### **Conclusion**

Arguably, today, technocracy, cultural disconnection, hyper-competitiveness, and psychological polarization have contributed to an unprecedented uptick in loneliness among younger generations in the United States. For decades, humanistic psychologists have provided alternatives that can serve an antidote. By creating conditions characterized by the presence, authentic encounters, and trusting relationships that promote safety, empowerment, and transformative change, both experiential avoidance and psychological suffering vis-à-vis real loneliness can be prevented. Also, paradoxically, providing adequate opportunities for an I-Thou way of being in an I-it world make it *more* possible to successfully navigate the struggle to create meaning from the experience of being alone (Bühler, 1969; Moustakas, 1961) and the ability to attain a greater balance of independence and interdependence. The Office of the Surgeon General's (2023) recent advisory has humanistic overtones, calling for the "healing effects of social connection and community" (p. 1) beyond attributing loneliness merely to individual choice (Malli et al., 2023). Otherwise, as capacities for empathy, curiosity, and tolerance of ambiguity and depth dwindle, up-and-coming generations "won't know what they've never experienced—nor seen!" (Schneider, 2019, p. 10).

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## Notes

1. Fromm-Reichmann also contrasted real loneliness with solitude necessary for the creative process (p. 305); loneliness following loss (p. 307); self-imposed solitude that can be endured only temporarily (p. 321), as portrayed in Beat writer Jack Kerouac's (1965) *Desolation Angels*; and discomfort being "temporarily alone" (p. 306) à la Maslow's (1999) *D-belonging*. Notably, 65 years ago, Fromm-Reichmann observed that the latter three tended to become problematically conflated with real loneliness. Per Motta's (2021) review, little has changed.
2. Adolescent loneliness has risen sharply since 2010, when social interaction gave way to time spent online (Twenge et al., 2019), contributing to feeling disorientedly "lonely but fearful of intimacy" (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). Importantly, Lim et al. (2020) stressed that what matters is not *whether* to use social media but rather *how* and *why* it is used. When employed to facilitate offline relationships, social media can reduce loneliness. Conversely, as a surrogate for offline relationships to compensate for poor social skills, social media only increases loneliness.
3. Defined as elevating one viewpoint to the utter exclusion of other possibilities (Schneider, 2013).

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