

## **Loneliness of senior citizens from urban and rural environment and its determinants. Polish experiences**

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**Abstract:** This article aims to diagnose the levels of loneliness of seniors from urban and rural areas in the Świętokrzyskie Province in Poland and its determinants. 62 seniors were surveyed (30 from the city and 32 from the countryside). To measure the level of loneliness during the research, the Rasch Loneliness Scale (S-Rasch) was used, whose authors are J. de Jong-Gireveld and F. Kamphuis, and the Polish adaptation of which was made by Józef Rembowski. The determinants of loneliness were investigated using the method of unfinished sentences, such as: I feel lonely because ...; I don't feel lonely because.... Although the research results are territorially limited to a small part of Poland and structurally limited to members of seniors' clubs or the university of the third age, they indicate and confirm a certain regularity: the greater the number and quality of relationships with people, the lower the level of loneliness. Therefore, interpersonal relationships, their quantity and quality, significantly affect the experience of loneliness in the old age.

*Keywords: seniors, loneliness, determinants of loneliness*

## **Introduction**

Loneliness and experiencing it is one of the basic determinants of human life. Especially at the time of Covid - 19, this is the condition which is often mentioned by people (Atzendorf, Gruber 2021). In this context, studies have been recently conducted on the loneliness of children and adolescents. This publication, however, aims to diagnose the levels of loneliness of senior citizens from urban and rural areas, as well as its determinants.

## **The concept of loneliness**

In the most common understanding, a lonely person is a person who lives alone, without family or friends. Loneliness is most often understood as being isolated, not participating in social life, badly creating a social role or being unable to be in a physical contact with the society (Cacioppo, Patrick 2008), (McDonald, Mair 2010). Writing about the experience of loneliness, Krystyna Ablewicz takes into account three ways of its occurrence: as a fact, as a variable of the ontogenetic development and as the effect of inter- and intrapersonal relations. She claims that loneliness is experienced both as an objectively existing regularity of human existence and as a relational state of experiencing life. It is a fact and an individualized experience at the same time. Both as a fact and as a subjective sense of “being lonely”, it is available to a human being in his regular, natural experience of perceiving experiencing the world of everyday life. Each time, loneliness belongs to someone and has a certain description (Ablewicz 2020). Grażyna Klimowicz, in her analyses, suggests the following typology of loneliness, depending on the source causing it: interpersonal loneliness (“longing for ...”) caused by the death and passing away of relatives; social loneliness caused by isolation or rejection by the community; cultural loneliness whose source is the sense of being different in the context of living in a group; cosmic loneliness consisting of being “beyond” the sense, experienced as hopelessness and meaninglessness of life, and psychological loneliness which means experiencing alienation from one’s own “self” (Klimowicz 1988). Janusz Gajda (1987, pp. 86-90) describes loneliness as a complex condition which is difficult to be assessed unambiguously, characterized by the presence of at least one of three levels: social (place of residence, financial situation, education, profession, opinion of the community, beauty and its defects), psychological (personality traits - e.g. introversion, inability to make contacts, complexes, a sense of inferiority, excessive ideal of love) and cultural (values, principles, patterns, standards..

Reading the literature on the subject, one can distinguish between objective and subjective elements in relation to the concept of loneliness. We can perceive loneliness as an objective physical condition, manifested by the lack of contacts with others, as a result of rejection or isolation, occurring as a result of external forces or experienced voluntarily. One can also point to a subjective sense of loneliness, which a person may experience despite the physical presence of other people. Loneliness can be experienced positively, negatively, or alternately, depending on various conditions (Dubas 2000, 111-114). Piotr Domeracki (2020) emphasizes that loneliness and the sense of community do not occur in separation, but they condition and complement each other in a significant way. He believes that each of us can and should deal with the challenges posed by loneliness and by being a part of a community, interweaving and combining periods of communality with episodes of loneliness in our lives.

Loneliness is an important phenomenon for conducting research in various scientific disciplines. Awareness of the consequences of experiencing loneliness in human development and existence also opens up the area of pedagogical research. Diagnosing, describing, and interpreting this phenomenon become important for education. Pedagogical questions: is there a type of loneliness experience in human life which is needed? How to work with a person experiencing loneliness so that it leads to development? How to educate them towards creative adaptation, without regression limiting developmental possibilities? They set the directions of research important for the future of the theory and practice of education.

## Conditions of loneliness

When we reflect on loneliness, it is worth paying attention to the contexts of human life. The literature on the subject indicates the conditions related to the social and physical situation. “The causes of loneliness [...] can be classified in social, psychological, and cultural categories and, depending on the dominant factors, highlight one or the other as the most important” (Gajda, 1997, p. 188).

In general, we can distinguish external and internal factors which condition the experience of loneliness. External factors are primarily the place of residence, the issue of isolation, the possibility and quality of contacts with others, the issue of marginalization and opinion in the community, as well as the social, professional, and financial situation. Internal factors are mainly an inferiority complex, inability to make contacts, an exaggerated ideal of love, health, temperamental features, such as introversion or extroversion (Gajda, 1997).

Research on the determinants of loneliness conducted among elderly people in the realities of Poland indicate a significant influence of many factors.

Fopka-Kowalczyk (2018, p.75) draws attention to the inappropriate treatment of the old age by the society, leading to the marginalization or isolation of seniors, stereotypes (e.g. linking the old age with infirmity and disability) leading to social exclusion. He also notices the disease problems (physical and mental) of elderly people resulting in their lower activity, the issues of losing the loved ones or the awareness of inevitable death. All this strengthens the experience of loneliness of an elderly person.

Loneliness can also be defined as living alone. Gajda points out that in the case of loneliness experienced by elderly people, it can be stated that its most common cause is the disappearance of the multi-generation family model, where, in the past periods, elderly people found their place and due respect (Gajda, 1997). That is why Piotr Szukalski (2005, pp. 217-218) unequivocally states that the overriding factor in combating loneliness is living together with the loved ones who are able to surround the elderly people with thoughtful and proper care.

Jundziłł and Pawłowska (2000, p.24) analyse the aetiology of loneliness in the context of the deficit of feelings experienced by a lonely person. The authors distinguish three levels of loneliness: loneliness in the context of contacts with other people, loneliness in the context of being in the thoughts and memory of others, and loneliness in the context of being treated instrumentally. The conclusions are as follows: the more superficial and “bland” relationships with others are, the more often loneliness and a sense of isolation are experienced; the less we are remembered and noticed by the community, the more often we feel a sense of loneliness; the lack of a sense of subjective relations and a belief that we are instrumentally used intensifies the sense of loneliness in a man.

Szczupał and Wiśniewska summarize their research on loneliness in the following words: “The respondents experience loneliness at different moments of their lives. It happens that, surrounded by other people, they feel subjectively lonely, because their interpersonal contacts are rare and superficial or unsatisfactory due to the generation gap. A sense of loneliness also arises when you know that many people of the same generation have already passed away. The respondents experience the loneliness caused by living alone very strongly, which they associate with a sense of imprisonment and worry about possible emergency situations, including dying alone. The respondents try to combat negative emotions through telephone contacts, although they do not feel fully satisfied with this form of contact with another person. People who have lived alone for a long time can get used to this state, even though it causes them psychological discomfort. The respondents also mentioned loneliness, which they experience particularly acutely in situations of life difficulties or when they are successful. They show a need of sharing their experiences with other people and the sense of emptiness after losing the closest person” (Szczupał, Wiśniewska, 2019, p. 34).

The study of the determinants of loneliness seems to be particularly important for pedagogy. The better the aetiology of the phenomenon is known, the more effective its prevention can be. Knowing the causes of senior citizens' loneliness - the one that leads to negative consequences for the individual and society, we can better plan to counteract it.

## Purpose of the research and research tool

The purpose of the research was to diagnose seniors' loneliness and its determinants. The following questions were posed: what is the level of seniors' loneliness in the urban and rural environment? What are the contexts (conditions) of experiencing loneliness by seniors from the urban and rural environment?

The Rasch Loneliness Scale (S-Rasch) was used in the research, whose authors are J. de Jong-Gireveld and F. Kamphuis, and the Polish adaptation of which was made by Józef Rembowski (de Jong-Gireveld, Kamphuis, 1985; Rembowski, 1992). The scale covers 30 items, divided into five subscales: the first - deprivation of a need for social contact (measures the experience of the lack of friendship and interest from others, the sense of rejection, experience of emptiness and lack of sense); the second - a situational sense of social rejection (measures the sense of losing important relationships or their limitation/insufficiency); third - the feeling of losing a social group (it is a measure of the sense of limitation or the lack of a social group, severely experiencing the lack of contact with neighbours and being disregarded by others); fourth - a sense of relationship with a group (it is a measure of pleasant contacts with others and having someone with whom one can share one's problems); fifth - a sense of meaningful relationships with people (it is a measure of the level of conviction that relations with others are important and a sense of acceptance by others). The method makes it possible to additionally distinguish between positive and negative loneliness (based on the contents of specific responses). There are 5 categories of answers: A means complete accuracy, and E - complete inaccuracy (Rembowski, 1992).

Determinants of loneliness (internal and external) were established on the basis of open statements of the respondents which were applied to the standardized loneliness scale. So, the test of unfinished sentences was included in the questionnaire of Rasch Loneliness Scale. The respondents were asked to complete sentences such as: "I feel lonely because"; "I don't feel lonely because". The respondents were also asked to explain what, according to them, loneliness was.

## Characteristics of the studied group

The study covered a group of sixty-two senior citizens from the Świętokrzyskie Province in Poland. The research was carried out in March 2022. The characteristics of the studies group, broken down by area, sex, age and type of residence, are presented in the following tables.

Table 1 Sex and age of the respondents living in the city

Sex and age	60-65	66-70	71-75	76-80	81+	total
women	3	8	4	2	1	18
men	-	6	2	1	3	12
total	3	14	6	3	4	30

Table 2 Sex and age of respondents from the countryside

Sex and age	60-65	66-70	71-75	76-80	81+	total
women	4	7	2	4	2	19
men	3	-	4	6	-	13
total	7	7	6	10	2	32

The studied group covered a total of 62 elderly people, including 32 seniors from rural areas and 30 from urban areas. There were 18 women and 12 men in the senior group living in the city. As many as 14 seniors were aged 66-70 - 8 women and 6 men, there were 6 (4 women and 2 men) people aged 71-75. There were 4 seniors at the age of 81+ (1 woman and 3 men), and 3 people in each of the remaining age groups. All the surveyed people living in the city were students of the university of the third age. The group of seniors from rural area were represented by 19 women and 13 men. The most

numerous age group was that at the age of 76-80, 10 persons (6 men and 4 women), the same number of persons was recorded in the age group of 60-65 and 66-70 - 7 people in each group. In both age groups, women dominated: in the 60-65 group, there were 4 women (and 3 men) and in the 66-70 group, there were only 7 women. Similarly, the 81+ group was also represented by only 2 women. All the respondents living in the countryside were attendees of the seniors' club.

Table 3 The place of residence and sex of the surveyed people living in the countryside

Place of residence/the countryside	women	men	total
Living with someone	13	13	26
Living alone	6	0	6
total	19	13	32

Table 4 The place of residence and sex of the surveyed people living in the city

Place of residence/a city	women	men	total
Living with someone	11	6	17
Living alone	7	6	13
total	18	12	30

According to the research, living alone is just as common for seniors from the countryside and from the city, although the same does not apply in terms of sex. In the rural environment, there was no "Living alone" answer in the group of men, while women gave such an answer 6 times. The "Living with someone" answer was given 13 times in the city group for both sex groups. "Living alone" answer was given in the city group by both men (6) and women (7). The "living with someone" answer was given by 13 women and 6 men. In relation to the entire group of the respondents, 69.3% live together with another person and as many as 30.7% live alone. This highlights one of the characteristics of the senior population which is singularization. It also confirms that mainly men can count on living with someone in the old age, while for women the old age more often means living alone, which is related to and results from the feminization rate of the group of elderly people.

Loneliness of senior citizens living in the city and in the countryside and its determinants in the light of own research.

The following table summarizes the results of own research carried out using the Rasch loneliness scale, divided into subscales and the living environment.

Table 5 Results on the Rasch loneliness scale broken down by the living environment

	City		The countryside	
	points	average	points	average
I	16.13	2.30	18.84	2.69
II	18.70	2.67	22.34	3.19
III	15.66	3.13	15.34	3.06
IV	19.46	3.89	20.15	4.03
V	24.33	4.07	26.40	4.40

According to Rembowski: "The Rasch scale is a good source of information. It can be used in individual and group studies, compared, and correlated with the results of other studies. First of all, it differentiates the results according to the type of loneliness, which can be reflected thanks to the introduced subscales (Rembowski 1992, p. 78). According to the authors of the Rasch scale, loneliness is related to the way of perceiving, experiencing, and assessing one's isolation and the lack of communication with other people. It arises when the number of interpersonal relationships is lower than desired or when the existing relationships do not achieve the desired degree of intimacy.

When analysing the research results, it can be noticed that there are no clear differences in the levels of loneliness in the group of seniors living in the countryside or in the city. The results are very similar regardless of the living environment.

The first subscale (i.e., the deprivation of a need for social contact) is considered to be the essence of loneliness. The results in this subscale (I) are the most representative for determining the level of loneliness. The research results show - average: 2.30 (city); 2.69 (the countryside) - that the levels of loneliness of the surveyed seniors, both in the urban and rural environment, are at an average level. The lack of a sense of loneliness is also confirmed by a small number of entries in the survey regarding the reasons for feeling lonely.

The results in the second subscale (II) concerning the situational sense of social rejection are also on average levels: 2.67 (the city); 3.19 (the countryside). A slightly higher level of a sense of social rejection of seniors in the countryside can be noticed, but generally the levels are in the middle ranges.

In the third subscale (III) indicating a sense of loss of a social group, the results are as follows - average: 3.13 in the city compared to 3.03 in the countryside. Research shows that the surveyed seniors, both in the urban and rural environment, have similar opinions about the loss of a social group. The levels are in the middle ranges.

The results of the fourth subscale (IV) concerning a sense of relationship with the group are as follows - average: 3.89 in the city compared to 4.03 in the countryside. The levels of the relationships of seniors with the group are higher than in the first three subscales, both in the city and in the countryside.

In the fifth subscale (V) indicating a sense of significant relationships with people, the results are the highest - average: 4.07 in the city and 4.40 in the countryside. A sense of meaningful relationships with people is the highest among seniors in a rural environment where there is the lowest level of anonymity and people (especially the elderly) know each other well and talk to each other on a regular basis.

The results for the last two subscales are at a higher level than for the first three. This is completely understandable and natural because the higher the sense of relationship with a group/relationship with people, the lower the level of social deprivation/rejection. Most of the respondents live with someone and are related to some group. The surveyed seniors are also members of the seniors' club or university of the third age.

People who have decided to enter the reason for not feeling lonely speak about relationships with people. Seniors usually have the following reasons for not feeling lonely: I have a supportive family, I have many friends, I have a partner, I have friends, I take part in organized events, I help others, I love people, I have a sister I can drink coffee with and talk to, I am open to work for others. The number of statements and their common denominator indicate the important role of interpersonal relationships in experiencing loneliness.

For few seniors, however, those who feel lonely, the reasons are expressed in the following way: I have no-one close to me, I'm shy, I don't have anyone. This is a negative form of expressing the same relationship between loneliness and interpersonal relations.

When asked to define loneliness, the respondents most often defined it as the lack of relationships. They wrote: loneliness is: no family, not being needed by anyone, inability to live with people, abandonment, isolation, longing for companionship, being locked in four walls without people, cancer suffered by friends.

## **Summary and pedagogical implications**

Although the research results are territorially limited to a small part of Poland and structurally limited to members of seniors' clubs or the university of the third age, they indicate and confirm a certain regularity. The greater the number and quality of relationships with people, the lower the level of loneliness. According to the surveyed seniors, interpersonal relationships, their quantity and quality, significantly affect the experience of loneliness in the old age. This applies to both the urban and rural environment, external and internal conditions, both objective and subjective experiences. For the surveyed seniors, interpersonal relationships include both living with someone under one roof

and the possibility of contacting other people in formal and/or informal way, as well as having friendships: being able to be with and for others.

The research results indicate the need to develop relationality among seniors as a form of counteracting loneliness. According to Toni Antonucci and Hiroko Akiyama social relations are fundamental to the experience of aging well (Antonucci, Akiyama (1991). Therefore, developing relationality becomes one of the main areas for pedagogy.

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