DIMENSIONS IN THE PROBLEM OF LONELINESS:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH  
IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Approaching loneliness:

Loneliness is becoming a major problem in the lives of many people. We live in a world that is on the move, where people regularly leave loved ones or are left behind. We experience drastic changes that often contribute to the loss of important attachments. We witness regularly the breakup of marriages and families, of communities and neighborhoods, of friendships and working relationships, of organizations and partnerships. We find communication gaps between generations, races, cultures, and the sexes. In addition there are abiding universal factors producing loneliness such as death, illness, disability, and rejection. Many people today can identify with Huck Finn's lament: "I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead." Unlike Huck, many do not outgrow their loneliness. The origins of loneliness reach deeply into the nature of our society and the person. In spite of the prevalence of loneliness in the modern world, people are still hesitant to discuss their own problems with it. The term suggests shame and failure. For many the topic of loneliness is as frightening as death, as alluring as cancer, as uplifting as depression. While usually not a topic of conversation, loneliness is nevertheless a painful experience that eats away at the lives of many of us.
It is surprising that so little study has been made of loneliness in light of the frequency of lonely complaints in contemporary art forms, the media, and everyday life. When Sullivan commented that loneliness could be a more powerful force than anxiety in the shaping of personal life, he was by implication providing an invitation to investigate it. (1953:260-262). Few have accepted the invitation. Why not? Weiss has suggested that scientists, like other mortals, tend to repress this painful experience and thus discount its power in personal life. (1973:9-12). Certainly medical research has ignored the potential power of loneliness as a contributing factor to serious illness and death. Lynch has stringently criticized the myopia in research projects that explore physical causes of heart failure but never raise questions about the deceased's interpersonal relationships. (1977). Statistical evidence indicates, however, deficiencies in the latter are correlated with the former; single persons die from heart failure three to ten times as often as married persons. Social and behavioral sciences have also ignored loneliness. Giorgi has shown how the emergence of a dominant behavioristic perspective prompts us to ignore many important experiences. (1970). Loneliness is one of them. Psychological Abstracts has no listing under loneliness. Readers are referred to "isolation," which is a neat quantifiable condition but not the same as loneliness, or to "alienation," which can be a form of loneliness or something quite different. Only recently has some substantial insight from scientific research been produced. But even if we sustain an examination of loneliness and overcome the narrowness of a strict behavioristic perspective, there is still confusion about loneliness that inhibits research, analysis, and understanding.

One goal of this article is to provide conceptual clarification so that we can more easily identify the experience and distinguish it from other similar and often related phenomena. In order to accomplish this I have combined phenomenological analysis with empirical research. What I mean by the former was elaborated at length in a treatise about existential phenomenology. (Sadler, 1969). Since others have questioned my use of phenomenology, I should make a few things clear at the beginning for those not familiar with the previous work. My attachment to phenomenology is not opposed to a scientific perspective or even to a behavioristic approach. My efforts run the other way: I attempt to unite phenomenology with various methods of social