

To what extent are community-centered societies more reliable than individualistic societies at negating isolation?

AP Seminar

Word Count: 1919

Introduction

According to a study written by the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, which oversees the nation's public health guidance, being socially disconnected can be as harmful to an individual as "smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day" (Office of the Surgeon General of the United States). The report adds that this is due to its impact on "behavioral, biological, and psychological processes, which in turn influence health outcomes." This statistic emphasizes the serious risks of social isolation, which at extreme levels can worsen an individual's overall health. The CDC—a federal government agency under the Department of Health and Human Services—also reported that, based on data from 42 American states and territories, about a third of American adults reported "feeling lonely," and approximately a quarter lacked "social and emotional support," highlighting the seriousness and widespread impact of social isolation and loneliness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). However, despite the widespread recognition of social isolation's harm, many modern societies follow individualistic values that prioritize independence, possibly increasing isolation and loneliness. Using data from the U.S. Census and the World Values Survey across 51 years and 78 countries, psychology researcher Henri C. Santos of the University of Waterloo stated that "most countries are moving towards greater individualism" ("Individualistic Practices and Values Increasing around the World"). This shift raises concerns, as prioritizing individualistic values like independence may hinder the development of strong social connections needed to combat isolation.

Thus, this reveals the necessity of reviewing alternative philosophies capable of sustaining interpersonal connections. Although individualistic societies often excel at economic advancement, implementing more community-centered structures offers a more reliable

alternative for reducing isolation by strengthening individuals' physical and mental wellbeing through consistent, shared support systems.

How Support Systems Enhance Mental and Psychological Wellbeing

Drawing on global data collected from a Pew Research Center report, the Office of the U.S Surgeon General stated that many adults across the world have described their social relationships as “the most important source of meaning, purpose, and motivation in their lives” (Office of the Surgeon General of the United States). Frequently engaging in such connections and support systems allows individuals to live more productive and fulfilling lives since meaningful engagement with others helps regulate stress and provide emotional stability. These relationships, such as with close friends and family, activate parts of the brain that allow individuals to actively regulate their emotions rather than be overcome by stress (Hostinar and Gunnar). Such benefits are embedded in collectivist societies since the community-centered structures within them promote social cohesion. This idea is further emphasized by the Office of the Surgeon General of the United States, who states that strong social connections decrease the chances of an individual perceiving challenging situations as stressful (Office of the Surgeon General of the United States). For instance, if an individual is going through a difficult time, their chances of being motivated to persevere are heightened when they have a strong social support system as opposed to being isolated. Due to such reasons, community-centered societies, which prioritize these relationships, show greater effectiveness in promoting conditions that strengthen mental and psychological health.

How Support Systems Improve Physical Health

Many studies have linked constant social connection to a noticeable increase in an individual's physical health as well. An article published by Harvard Medical School associated

the reduced stress from social support to fewer problems in “coronary arteries, gut function, insulin regulation, and the immune system,” all of which can be negatively affected when an individual experiences high levels of stress (“The Health Benefits of Strong Relationships”). This evidence highlights the “chain effect” on the body, explaining how managed stress, specifically through strong social support systems, can prevent widespread harm across various bodily functions. Therefore, community-based societies prove to be an effective public health strategy, as they provide the connections needed to regulate the stress that causes these dysfunctions.

This idea is strengthened in an article written by sociologists Debra Umberson and Jennifer Karas Montez, who state that “supportive interactions with others benefit immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular functions” (Umberson and Karas Montez). Their findings expand on this by showing how social support can not only prevent harm, but actively sustain essential bodily systems as well. This again highlights the crucial role social connection plays in an individual's physical health.

Further emphasizing the urgency of maintaining strong social relationships, Umberson and Montez’s paper also reveals that those who are more socially connected not only tend to live longer, but face a drastically lower risk of death than their more socially isolated peers (Umberson and Karas Montez). This suggests that societies should prioritize connection over isolation, as it increases the likelihood that individuals live longer and healthier lives—an effect amplified by community-centered societies which rely on strong social connections.

Consequences Of Weak Social Support

A weak or nonexistent social support system can lead to detrimental consequences to an individual’s health. Researcher Jade Guarnera of the Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition

at Deakin University and colleagues concluded that prolonged social isolation and loneliness can lead to accelerated cognitive decline and higher risks of dementia (Guarnera et al.). Being socially disconnected has the power to weaken mental processes needed for everyday life, showing why individualistic social structures—which are commonly associated with isolation—may not be effective at supporting individuals' wellbeing. Furthermore, if an isolated individual has a mental disorder such as dementia, they are more likely to be unable to manage their condition than someone with a strong support system, stressing the dangers of isolation.

Additionally, researchers from the Office of the Surgeon General of the United States conducted a study among older adults where they found that “both social isolation and loneliness have been shown to independently increase the likelihood of depression or anxiety” (Office of the Surgeon General of the United States). This is significant because, as previously stated, a large majority of adults in America expressed that they felt lonely, making the dangers of these widespread conditions more alarming and more critical to address. In fact, these challenges are becoming so prevalent that they are contributing to increased economic pressures as well. Lidia Engel of the Faculty of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences at the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine et al. conducted a study where they discovered that “social isolation led to extra costs, mostly related to healthcare and lost work productivity, ranging from US\$2 billion to US\$25.2 billion per year” (Engel et al.). This significant amount of spending reveals that the problems with isolation are not just private struggles, but a crisis that significantly affects both healthcare and workplace systems by increasing the need for medical care and lowering workplace productivity. These findings show that individuals who are socially isolated and or have weak social safety nets are at an increased risk of obtaining mental and cognitive

disabilities. As people experience these effects, the consequences gain severity on a social level, further showing the widespread impact of social disconnection.

In contrast, community-centered societies, which are rooted in collectivism, encourage mutuality among individuals. Synthesizing findings from other psychologists, research assistant Charlotte Nickerson of Harvard University stated that “collectivists value security, good social relationships, harmony within ingroups, and personalized relationships” (Nickerson). Based on these findings, community-centered societies may be better at sustaining individual wellbeing as they prioritize fostering the social connectivity needed to negate isolation and many of the issues it may cause. As opposed to individualism, which is commonly associated with self-reliance (Komisarof and Akaliyski).

Counterargument

The belief that community-centered societies are more beneficial to an individual's wellbeing than individualistic societies is challenged by Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gerard Roland of the Department of Economics at the University of California, Berkeley. Their findings show that countries with more individualist cultures have had higher long-run growth than countries with a more collectivist culture because they provide both economic and social status rewards, resulting in “higher rates of innovation and economic growth” (Gorodnichenko and Roland). Thus, their perspective directly negates the claims of the previous research mentioned by Engel et al., as they show that the provision of economic stability that comes with individualistic structures may lead to better quality of life in societies, potentially being more beneficial to wellbeing than that of collectivist cultures. However, this notion is contradicted by Jian Wang and Liuna Geng of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Nanjing University, who analyzed 986 respondents from the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey, and

found that socioeconomic status only “had a significant impact on people’s physical health,” while lifestyle had “significant positive effects on both physical and psychological health” (Wang and Geng). Their findings clarify that economic growth alone is not enough to guarantee overall wellbeing, in both physical and mental health. Rather, healthy lifestyle factors such as interpersonal connections have a greater influence on an individual's wellbeing. Thus, even with the economic benefits that may result from individualistic societies, such systems are not able to provide the consistent social connection needed to sustain overall wellbeing that collective societies provide effectively.

Conclusion

The effects of isolation can be harmful to an individual’s wellbeing, and can be especially amplified throughout individualistic societies. Psychologist Manuela Barreto et al. analyzed a report of “46,054 participants aged 16–99 years, living across 237 countries, islands, and territories...” finding that “People in individualistic (vs. collectivist) countries reported more loneliness,” which the authors state negatively contributes to wellbeing (Barreto et al.). This shows that societies need a shift towards a philosophy that negates isolation and loneliness and in turn, sustains wellbeing. The implications of prioritizing community-centered societies would induce strong social connections that play a major role in managing mental and physical health concerns, which would consequently improve the quality of life among individuals better than individualistic societies.

However, this argument is limited, as much of the evidence backing it shows correlational relationships rather than directly proving that individualistic societies lead to isolation. Additionally, an attempt at a worldwide shift from individualistic to community-centered societies would be difficult and unrealistic to implement due to the rising

levels of individualism and the legislation and economic benefits behind it (“Individualistic Practices and Values Increasing around the World”).

A more practical solution would be to incorporate community-centered customs within individualistic societies. One way this can be accomplished is by implementing social prescribing into their healthcare systems. The National Health Service in England describes social prescribing as “an approach that connects people to activities, groups, and services in their community to meet the practical, social and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing,” by referring individuals to social prescribing link workers, who help them create personalized care and support plans and connect them with community groups (NHS England). This approach is more effective as it has already been implemented and shown promising, though still emerging, evidence of negating isolation. In fact, as of 2022, 17 countries had already developed and/or implemented social prescribing programs illustrating its growing acceptance as a practice worldwide (Morse et al.). Therefore, social prescribing is a helpful tool to address loneliness, although more research is required to confirm just how well it works (Reinhardt et al.). Cities within these individualistic societies can also accomplish this by designing environments that promote social engagement. Coffee shops are an excellent example as they provide a space for individuals to socialize and generate connections which leads to reduced isolation in some (Ferreira et al.). This illustrates how implementing community-centered customs in individualistic societies is an effective, achievable way to combat the growing concerns of isolation.

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