



The Essential Role of social connectedness in human life

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Background:

Humans are social creatures by nature. This means that we have an innate need to connect with others and form relationships. This connection with others is called social connectedness. It's like having a web of relationships that make us feel like we belong and are understood by others.

At the core of social connectedness is the fundamental desire for belongingness and acceptance. As social beings, we seek out relationships and form bonds with family members, friends, and communities. These connections provide us with a sense of identity and purpose, as well as emotional support during both joyous and challenging times.

Throughout history, humans have lived in groups, tribes, and communities, recognising the importance of cooperation and collaboration for survival. Whether hunting together for food, building shelters, or raising children, our ancestors relied on strong social bonds to navigate the complexities of life. This collective approach to living not only enhanced our chances of survival but also laid the foundation for the development of language, culture, and society.

Yet the question arises - Are we truly dependent on one another as social beings at an individual level?

Introduction:

In a world tied to screens and devices, the fundamental essence of human connection and empathy stands challenged. However, one truth remains: we are inherently social creatures. Human beings rely upon companionship and interaction for our emotional well-being and our survival.

Beginning of social dependence:

In order to understand social connectedness, one must understand how society came to be. After all, society is where we form and build our relationships.

In the 16th century Richard Hooker, an English priest and theologian tried to prove how the state was originally formed. In his work "Natural Law, Consent, and Equality: William of Ockham by Richard Hooker". This however did not gain much momentum.

Later in the 16th century, English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes was influenced by the English Civil War and believed human nature was cruel. He sought out an explanation and believed a social contract theory would provide security. He wrote a book "Leviathan" in which he stated the need for an absolute sovereign. With his explanation, he brought in the laws of nature. Through laws of nature, he developed the concept of the state of nature and his idea about social contract theory.

Hobbes stated that a state of nature existed where humans existed in a constant state of conflict and competition, driven by their self-interests. However, in order to escape this condition and secure their well-being, individuals voluntarily give up some of their freedoms.

to establish societies which are governed by laws and institutions. This transition established a civil society and moved mankind into living a more governed and kinder life.

Additionally, in the 17th century philosopher, John Locke presented his view of social contract theory. In this individuals unite to protect their natural rights to life, liberty, and property. However, this protection is not solely achieved through the establishment of governments but also the formation of communities based on trust that is established.

Both Hobbes and Locke believed in the importance of social relationships yet were more concerned about how it would uphold a lasting political organization.

However, in the 18th century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau famously proclaimed that "man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains," suggesting that while humans are inherently free, they are also social creatures constrained by societal norms and obligations. He disagreed with Hobbes and Locke's point of view of giving up rights to a superior leader. He believed that surrendering rights to a superior leader would result in the loss of an individual's free will, leading to increased chaos rather than peace.

Rousseau believed that man is good and benevolent and that a contract would only be formed which reflects the collective goodwill of the community.

In the end, it was concluded from all three philosophers' theories that at the beginning of time, men lived in a state of nature, a time where there were no rules to be governed by and one could make decisions based on his wishes. However, over time, men wished to expand their lifestyle and thus entered into an agreement known as the social contract theory. The social contract theory states that individuals agree to form societies and governments and are willing to surrender certain freedoms in exchange for protection, stability, and mutual benefits. The contract suggested that human companionship fulfils the inborn need for connection and belonging. It provides roads for communication, empathy, and shared experiences, which are essential for individual well-being and emotional fulfilment.

Thus, through the contract the whole concept of social connectedness and dependance was born.

Literature review:

Through psychological theories, the need for social connectedness is proven. The attachment theory provides insight into how there is a need for connection among individuals. According to this theory, it is believed that people are born with the need to forge bonds and this bond is what helps them thrive later in life. Pioneered by British psychologist John Bowlby stated that a human being initially develops this connection with an individual's primary caregiver.

He emphasizes that if this attachment is strong then the child tends to develop strong self-esteem and better self-reliance as they grow up. This secures a strong base and they tend to perform better academically, have successful social relationships and are less likely to suffer from anxiety or depression.

In her book, psychologist Sue Johnson discusses how the attachment to a certain person evolves across each stage of one's life. During childhood, the child is attached typically towards the mother who provides them with comfort and support. As one transitions into adolescence peer relationships become more significant and the attachment may shift towards peers. Lastly, as one transitions into adulthood attachment shifts towards life partners who fulfill the need for intimacy and emotional connection.

However, it can be seen that individuals who do not form such connections with caregivers at various stages tend to suffer from various disorders. Reactive attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder are some examples. In both these cases there may be a lack of boundaries or emotional management in the bonds formed. This displays challenges in forming connections and navigating social interactions.

Evidently, this highlights the role that human beings and companionship are necessary for the proper development and survival of an individual.

Role of personality:

In 1910, Carl G Jung a renowned psychologist categorised people into two types based on their personality- introvert and extrovert. Later on, in 1941 Hans Eysenck introduced a third type- ambivert. To date, the same classification is used. An extrovert is someone who thrives on socialising, enjoys being the center of attention, and tends to seek out social gatherings. Alternatively, an introvert is someone who prefers solitude, and quiet activities at home, and may turn down large social events. Ambiverts are a mix of both.

Broadly speaking, introverts tend to be stereotyped as social recluses who avoid human interaction and prefer isolation. While it's true that introverts enjoy their alone time, they also need social connections.

Through various research conducted by psychologist Colin DeYoung in his paper "Introversion" and by Dr Marti Laney in her book The Introvert Advantage, it is seen that there is a biological difference between introverts and extroverts. The difference lies between the dopamine receptors.

An extrovert requires more dopamine as compared to an introvert which is why it is seen that introverts tend to prefer solitude more in comparison. However, this doesn't disregard the fact that introverts still need social interaction. They too have a circle of close friends that whom they spend time and build meaningful relationships with.

Impact on health:

Social connectedness can also have an impact on physical health. It is seen that those who form more stable and supportive relationships tend to have better physical health as compared to the latter. It raises their incentive to adopt healthier lifestyles and cut out negative habits. Not only does it help individuals but can also raise spirits and bring about healthier lifestyles in communities.

Research done by social psychologists Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton revealed that individuals with strong social relationships have a 50% higher likelihood of survival compared to those with weaker or fewer social ties. It has also been studied that patients recovering from long surgeries tend to recover quickly or feel less pain with a stronger support system around them.

Therefore, it is seen that social isolation has a negative impact on physical health. Based on a study done by PLOS ONE there was a 33% increase in all-cause mortality among individuals who are socially isolated. It also leads to a 40% increase in dementia. This may be due to the fact that poor relationships can eventually lead to adopting unhealthy habits therefore increasing the mortality rate. Moreover, another analysis by senior scientist Quan he Yang who specialises in heart disease and stroke prevention, demonstrated that loneliness and social isolation are associated with a 29% increased risk of coronary heart disease and a 32% heightened risk of stroke.

Besides physical health, there is an obvious impact on mental health. The absence of support networks affects the individual's emotional health. It leads to a lack of emotional reassurance and coping mechanisms. Social isolation can increase feelings of loneliness and alienation. It can even trigger stress responses in the body.

A survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that over one-third of adults in the United States report feeling lonely on a regular basis. Moreover, individuals who lack social connections are more likely to experience feelings of alienation and disconnection from their peers and communities. These feelings of loneliness and alienation can have profound implications for mental health, contributing to symptoms of depression and low self-esteem.

Survey:

In a survey I conducted, I analysed responses from two distinct age groups: individuals aged 16-17 and individuals aged 45-55.

There were 40 participants in total. 20 from each age group. Since it was a sample group there was a varied mix of both genders.

10 statements were presented and answers were presented as a Likert scale. The options varied from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The questions were as follows:

- I believe social interaction is essential for survival.
- Without social interaction, individuals can lead fulfilling lives.
- Loneliness can have detrimental effects on a person's mental and physical health.
- Humans have an innate need for social connection and belonging.
- Social interaction plays a crucial role in maintaining overall well-being.
- I feel happier and more fulfilled when I engage in social activities with others.
- Lack of social interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and depression.
- Social connections are essential for building a support system during challenging times.
- The quality of my social interactions significantly impacts my overall quality of life.
- Social interaction enhances personal growth and development.
- Social media is a form of human interaction

The survey revealed a consensus among both parties on their belief that social interaction is necessary for survival and how social isolation can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety.

Notably, it was seen that participants from the age bracket 45-55 were more concrete and firm with their thoughts regarding the topic as compared to the younger group. Individuals falling in the 16-17-year-old bracket tended to have varied responses. However, the overarching sentiment that social connectedness is essential remained constant.

However, there was one major difference between the two groups. It was seen that participants from the age bracket 45-55 believed that social media is not a form of social interaction while the younger group had an opposing view.

It was seen that 75% of the participants aged 45-55 believed it is not a form of social interaction while 85% of the participants aged 16-17 believed it is a form of interaction and 10% voted for a neutral response.

Social media as interaction:

However, some studies have shown that social media can be a form of social interaction. Although not an exact replica of face-to-face interaction, interaction through messaging, comments, and likes can be counted.

According to statistics from a global survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2023, approximately 3.96 billion people worldwide were active social media users, representing over 50% of the global population. This displays the role of social media as a primary avenue for social interaction

Research conducted by the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication in 2023 found that 76% of social media users engage in discussions or debates on various subjects, ranging from politics and current events to hobbies and interests. This highlights how social media transcends geographical boundaries, allowing individuals to connect with like-minded people worldwide and engage in meaningful conversations.

Beyond social interaction, social media can bring about social connectedness with its users. In 2023, a study conducted by the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships found that 82% of social media users reported feeling connected to others when using social networking sites. Another study published in the Journal of Health Communication in 2023 revealed that 64% of social media users have received emotional support from friends or acquaintances on social networking sites during times of need.

This shows how social media can bring about a feeling of connectedness through messages, life updates or creating a community one can rely on.

Contradiction:

Despite all this research, there are also contradictory views about the importance of social connectedness.

One study published in the Annual Review of Psychology in 2018 examined the impact of social relationships on mortality risk. It was found that while strong social connections are associated with numerous health benefits and can contribute to longevity, the absence of social relationships does not necessarily lead to immediate physical harm or mortality. Simply put, while social connectedness enhances life satisfaction and may promote better health outcomes, it may not be as essential for immediate survival as other basic needs.

Similarly, a meta-analysis published in the journal Perspectives on Psychological Science in 2015 investigated the relationship between social isolation and mortality risk. The analysis found that while social isolation is indeed a risk factor for mortality, its impact may be less pronounced than other factors such as smoking or obesity. This suggests that while social connectedness is important for overall health and well-being, its absence may not pose an immediate threat to survival in the same way as certain physical health risks.

Yet it's important to note that these findings do not diminish the other research. Humans are social beings and meaningful relationships can contribute to better physical and mental health. While social connectedness may not be essential for immediate survival it is necessary for fostering support, creating resilience and enhancing the overall well-being of an individual.

Conclusion:

Thus it can be concluded the essentialness of human connectedness can be proved through various theoretical and empirical data.

From the standpoint of social contract theory, the formation of societies through collective agreements underpins the structure necessary for security and order, highlighting the fundamental need for social cohesion to curb the anarchic tendencies of the human condition.

Attachment theory further explains the critical role of early relationships in shaping an individual's ability to form stable, healthy connections throughout life. Secure attachments in childhood foster emotional stability and resilience, which are crucial for psychological well-being.

Empirical research consistently shows that social connectedness has profound effects on physical and mental health. Individuals with strong social ties have lower risks of mortality, better immune function, and lower levels of stress and depression.

In the digital age, social media has become a double-edged sword in the realm of social connectedness. While it offers unprecedented opportunities for connection and community building, it can also lead to superficial interactions and increased feelings of isolation if not used mindfully.

Overall, these perspectives highlight that social connectedness is not merely a beneficial aspect of human life but a critical component for survival and well-being. As society evolves, understanding and fostering meaningful connections will remain pivotal in promoting both individual and collective health.

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