

Feeling lonely? Get warm!

Tereza Mahdalová

Psychologický ústav FFMU, Brno

info@psychologon.cz

There can be no doubt that social exclusion has a significant impact on people's mental and physical well-being. A lack of social contact is stressful for all living creatures and causes anxiety and depression (Zhong, Leonardelli, 2008). All of this is well-known, but why is loneliness so often associated with cold? What do these two have in common? Let's find out.

Original version of this article is available on:

<http://psychologon.cz/component/content/article/14-psycholog-online/311-citite-se-osamele-zahrejte-se>

There can be no doubt that social exclusion has a significant impact on people's mental and physical well-being. A lack of social contact is stressful for all living creatures and causes anxiety and depression (Zhong, Leonardelli, 2008). All of this is well-known, but why is loneliness so often associated with cold? What do these two have in common? Let's find out.

In everyday language loneliness and cold go hand in hand. This can be illustrated by the following quote by the Austrian writer Vicki Baum: "Fame always brings loneliness. Success is as cold as ice and loneliness is like the North Pole." The linguistic link between social isolation and coldness reflects people's tendency to employ concepts based on physical experience (for example cold) to

describe complex notions, such as social rejection (Lakoff, 1987). For example, S. Asche's study (1946) shows that qualities, such as generous, sociable, popular and humane, are often associated with a warm-hearted person.

Not only do people consciously describe social interaction with thermal concepts, they also understand interpersonal contacts differently depending on temperature conditions. In a study by L. Williams and J. Bargh (2008), the experimenter asked the participants to hold a cup of hot or cold coffee, while they were assessing another person's qualities. The contact with a cup of hot coffee led the participants to describe the assessed person as more warm-hearted and friendly than when they were holding cold coffee.

The meaning of metaphors is rarely literal (Galinsky, Glucksberg, 2000). For example, the phrase "a cold look" does not describe the actual experience of the ambient temperature. Recent studies show, however, that this is not always the case. In a number of experiments, C. Zhong and K. Liljenquist (2006) found out that to describe violations of morals people employ not only words related to physical cleanness (for example, "have a clean criminal record") but also feel the need to clean their body after being reminded of their past wrongdoings (see Zhong, Liljenquist, 2006). This corresponds to the theories of embodied cognition and perceptual symbols. These theories assume that thinking includes perceptual simulations (Zhong, Leonardelli, 2008). If this is so and thinking does include perceptual simulations of the senses (including perceptual simulation of temperature), social rejection can provoke an actual feeling of cold, for cold is frequently associated with social exclusion. This association can have its roots in early life experience. When a parent holds a baby in their arms, the baby can feel their warmth, but if they move away, the baby feels coldness. The child then has this finding confirmed in later contacts with people, for example when a group of people increases temperature as a result of body warmth emission or when cold weather limits interpersonal contacts (Zhong, Leonardelli, 2008).

C. Zhong and G. Leonardelli (2008) tried to answer the question of whether social exclusion provokes an actual feeling of cold by asking their respondents to guess the temperature in a room after imagining a situation of social exclusion or, on the contrary, inclusion. The participants imagining social exclusion tended to state lower values of the room temperature. This finding was not enough for the researchers and, therefore, they conducted another experiment in which they tried to simulate an actual experience of social exclusion. Afterwards, they monitored the participants' preferences for warm food and drinks over cold ones. The participants who experienced feelings of social exclusion preferred warm food and drinks.

J. Bargh and I. Shalev (2011) focused on the use of physical warmth when a person feels lonely. They came to the conclusion that when a person feels lonely, they regulate their body temperature without being aware of the link between physical and social warmth. The more lonely the participants felt, the warmer bath or shower they took and the longer time they spent in warm water. Physical warmth can, therefore, substitute for social warmth to a certain extent. It is yet to be determined whether regulation of ambient temperature could be used as a relatively cheap and undemanding way for the support of group cohesion.

These findings also offer an interesting view of the origin of seasonal affective disorder (“winter depression”), which manifests itself in otherwise healthy individuals during winter months. It is possible that low winter temperatures catalyse an experience of social exclusion (see Zhong, Leonardelli, 2008).

In the 19th century the American poet Lucy Larcom wrote: “If the world seems cold to you, kindle fires to warm it”. Go ahead.

Translated by Lucie Seibertová

Sources

- 1 Asch, S. (1946). Forming Impressions of Personality. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41(3), 258-290. Dostupný z WWW: http://thenewschoolhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/asch_formingimpressionsofpersonality-web.pdf
- 2 Bargh, J. A., & Shalev, I. (2011). The Substitutability of Physical and Social Warmth in Daily Life. *Emotion*, 12(1), 154-162. Dostupný z WWW: http://www.yale.edu/acmelab/articles/Bargh_Shalev_Emotion.pdf
- 3 Galinsky, A. D., & Gluckberg, S. (2000). Inhibition of the literal: Metaphors and idioms as judgmental primes. *Social Cognition*, 18(1), 35-54. doi: 10.1521/soco.2000.18.1.35.
- 4 Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 5 Williams, L., & Bargh, J. A. (2008). Experiencing physical warmth promotes interpersonal warmth. *Science*, 322(5901), 606-607. Dostupný z WWW: http://www.yale.edu/acmelab/articles/Science_coffee_study.pdf
- 6 Zhong, C., & Leonardelli, G. J. (2008). Cold and lonely: Does social exclusion literally feel cold? *Psychological Science*, 19, 838–842. Dostupný z WWW: <http://rady.ucsd.edu/faculty/seminars/2009/papers/zhong-cold.pdf>
- 7 Zhong, C., & Liljenquist, K. (2006). Washing away your sins: threatened morality and physical cleansing. *Science*, 313(5792), 1451-1452. Dostupný z WWW: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/313/5792/1451.full.pdf>

Picture Source

- 1 http://fc03.deviantart.net/fs71/i/2013/352/b/1/the_little_match_girl_by_johnpatience-d6ydrz.jpg