CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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Individuals try to fulfill their need for intimate relationships or confidants (Bowlby, 1973). This need of intimate attachment or confidant greatly influences not only their social engagements but also their quality of life. As the child grows up, the need for attachment remains there but the source of gratification changes. Individuals become more anxious about their breaking of attachments and the failure to fulfill the need for attachment makes them lonely (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). Loneliness among adults has been found to be severe, painful and killer in nature (Rokach, 1996). Studies suggest that almost everyone experiences loneliness though occasionally (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). According to Wood (1986), loneliness is one of the most fundamental and powerful human experiences. Loneliness is more common than the “common cold” (Peplau, 1988). Loneliness, after being largely ignored by social scientists until the mid-20th century, got a continuous increase in the flow of work since the 1970s and has been considered as an important concept since then (Gierueld, Tilburg & Dvkstra, 2006). One of the first published papers on loneliness was based on the loneliness of psychiatric nurses had been written in 1955 by Hildegard Peplau. Further came a book by Weiss in 1973 which majorly provided the direction to the literature of loneliness.

Loneliness has been majorly considered as an ‘emotion’ in the literature (e.g., Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005; Rook, 1984; Wood, 1986). Rook (1984) pointed out that unlike support deficits, loneliness is characterized by negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, boredom, self-deprecation and feelings of marginality. Wood (1986) described loneliness as a fundamental emotion. She established that the feelings associated with loneliness alert individuals to their absence of social relationships. According to Cacioppo and Hawkley (2005), loneliness is a complex emotion marked by negative feelings and cognitions, including unhappiness, pessimism, self-blame, and depression. Nykliček, Vingerhoets & Zeelenberg (2010) in the book on “emotional regulation and wellbeing” have defined loneliness as a
negative emotional state. However, not all the researches on loneliness have described its place in the field of emotions. Wright (2005) states that it is questionable whether loneliness is actually an emotion or not. She argues that it is more than merely an emotion. Her argument states that the theoretical literature on loneliness tends to conceptualize it as being associated with certain emotions, rather than being an emotion in itself. According to her, however, loneliness is seen more as a social problem. Remarkably, she agrees on the fact that loneliness is seldom studied by emotion researchers (Wright, 2005). From the above discussion, this is quite explicit that researchers have identified the connotation of loneliness in terms of emotion. However, the proper positioning of loneliness in the field of ‘emotion’ is missing. The expected reason behind it seems to be that the causes of loneliness have been meticulously studied but the construct majorly lacks the theoretical background. Moreover, the field of loneliness seems to be quite haphazard as various researchers have various perspective on its positioning. Loneliness is seen a ‘social problem’, a ‘psychological problem’, a ‘psychiatric problem’ a ‘cultural problem’, a ‘socio-economic problem’ and a ‘biological problem’. Unfortunately, the research movement has not embodied and advanced the study of loneliness within one framework (Wright, 2005).

1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The primary motivation for this study came from few observations and then through informal discussions with some friends who are employed in different industries. Thereafter, we went through several reports and literature to look into the statistics and existing researches. According to a recent report (WHO, 2014), India has the highest suicide rate in the world, with almost 2, 60,000 suicides in 2012. One of the major attributes behind this is found to be loneliness. A research conducted by Duke University says that the number of Americans between 1985 and 2004, who said there was no one with whom they can discuss their important matters has increased by threefold to 25 percent. Another research mentions that about 53
percent of the people in U.S. felt intensely lonely in their public lives (McPherson, Smith-Lovin&Brashears, 2006). Hence, regardless of being an individualistic nation (such as the USA) or a collectivistic one (such as India) (see Hofstede, 1983), loneliness is a phenomenon which is pervasive and inevitable.

Though loneliness is a predominant workplace emotion (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011) unfortunately it has received scant attention within the field of management (Erdil&Ertosun, 2011; Ertosun, &Erdil, 2012; Lam & Lau, 2012; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011; Wright, 2005; Wright, 2012; Wright, Burt & Strongman, 2006). Given the gap in the literature, in the present study, we attempt to explore the phenomena of loneliness in the workplace.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Literature asserts that not just personality, but also the situational factors do affect a person’s loneliness (e.g. Gierveld, 1998; Peplau &Perlamn, 1982). Peplau (1988) mentioned three set of factors that might lead to loneliness: personal factors- e.g. shy, introverted, low self-esteem or less assertive people, situational factors, e.g., co-workers in direct competition for scarce resources and cultural factors, e.g., geographical mobility, values of rugged individualism. Three levels of loneliness have been defined on the basis of its degree- transient, situational and chronic (Peplau, 1985). The focus of this research is on situational loneliness which is said to be more distressing and painful and becomes chronic if not cured (Peplau, 1985). Chronic loneliness, which is considered to be clinical, has already been studied adequately in the past. Weiss (1973) considered loneliness as a ‘social deficit’ and posited that no single relationship can satisfy all the basic provisions of social relationships (for more details, see Weiss, 1973). Peplau (1985) explained the role of environmental characteristics of the individual in making him/her lonely. According to her, ‘some social situations are undoubtedly more conducive to loneliness than others’ (p. 276). Given the importance of situational factors impacting
loneliness, we aim to explore these factors in the context of organizations. This study takes both individual and situational factors into consideration.

The present study attempts to explore the factors that impact the experience of loneliness among employees, specifically at their workplace. We believe that understanding the factors that might impact the whole experience of loneliness at work will help the organizations to identify how to mitigate the loneliness of their employees within their workplaces. Based on the above discussion, we go ahead with the following research objective in mind-

- To explore whether people experience loneliness at their workplace or not.
- What factors do affect the experience of workplace loneliness?

The study has been done in Indian context because of three reasons. First, India’s workforce, (those between the age group of 15 and 64 years) is expected to rise from almost 64 percent of its population in 2009 to 67 percent in 2020 (DaVanzo et al., 2011). Hence, studying loneliness at Indian workplaces is of utmost importance. Second, loneliness is a growing phenomenon in the Indian context. For example, lots of helplines have been initiated in India to help out with loneliness and depression. Websites such as yourcandidfriend.com, ethoshealthcare.com, onlinecounselling.in, onlinecounselling4u.com and sharingdard.com etc. have been established to provide shoulders to people who feel lonely or depressed in their personal or professional life. Thousands of Indians have already registered themselves to these helplines. Finally, in spite of its severity, surprisingly studies on workplace loneliness are at best scant in the Indian context.

1.4 OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION

The present chapter provides a brief idea of the phenomenon studied in this research. It includes the introduction of the topic, research objectives and the rationale behind the study in the Indian context. In the second chapter, a description of the evolution and conceptualization of the topic
has been provided, what various streams of literature say about loneliness, its trait and state characteristics, how the phenomena are different from other related phenomenon and the existing literature on loneliness at the workplace. Chapter 3 discusses the rationale behind qualitative study, method, analysis and findings of the exploratory qualitative study that was conducted using the grounded theory methodology. Based on the findings of the qualitative study and the literature, chapter 4 develops a research model and appropriate hypotheses for the quantitative study. It also discusses the reason for opting a mixed method approach for this study. Chapter 5 delves into the description of the methodology employed for the quantitative study of sample 1, which is based on data from nurses. It also discussed the finding of the study. Chapter 6 involves quantitative study based on data of BPO employees and discusses the detailed study and its findings. Lastly, chapter 7 includes general discussion, reflects upon the theoretical and managerial contribution, limitations of the study and directions for future research.