CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING WORKPLACE LONELINESS: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

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3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: MIXED METHOD

The study is a mixed method approach, based on two sources of data - a qualitative approach and a subsequent quantitative survey-based approach. “Mixed methods research represents research that involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; p 265). Studies in which qualitative and quantitative methods are integrated make them valuable. Mixed method studies can capitalize on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Östlund, Kidd, Wengström & Rowa-Dewar, 2011). Mixed method research is being used increasingly by the researchers and most of the published mixed method researches have been employed to find answers which cannot be done alone by one these (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings provides findings which were not possible with any single approach (Bryman, 2007; as cited in Östlund et al., 2011).

The mixed method can be understood in terms of fully mixed method and partially mixed method approaches. In a fully mixed method approach, the results of both qualitative and quantitative data are integrated or mixed at some point in time. It can be during data collection, analysis or interpretation. However in partially mixed method approach, both qualitative and quantitative studies are done either concurrently or sequentially before mixing them at interpretation stage (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Östlund et al., 2011). Further, truly (or fully) mixed method approach is divided into various typologies - Concurrent data analysis, parallel data analysis and sequential data analysis (for details, see Östlund et al., 2011). A study in which qualitative data is used to generate items for the development of quantitative measures is an example of sequential mixed method analysis (Östlund et al., 2011).

A rationale behind using a quantitative approach to the in-depth qualitative study in this study is to increase the validity of the findings of qualitative data and to provide strength to the
propositions made in the qualitative study. Moreover, qualitative data helped us in exploring the phenomenon of workplace loneliness however; quantitative data will help us in identifying the extent of the strength causal relationships explored from the qualitative study. According to Victor, Scambler and Bond (2009), loneliness is a topic which provides benefits for the integration of both qualitative and quantitative study. As a research topic, it can only be understood by using a mix of both qualitative data and qualitative data. This also justifies the idea of using mixed method approach in this study.

3.2 PART 1: QUALITATIVE APPROACH

3.2.1 Introduction

The present study attempts to explore the factors that affect the experience of loneliness among employees, especially at their workplace. This research believes that understanding the why of loneliness will help the organizations to identify how to mitigate the loneliness of their employees within their workplaces. As these are fundamental, complex questions with little empirical research to draw answers from, an explorative, qualitative empirical approach was felt to be appropriate. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect first-person accounts of loneliness. According to Victor et al. (2008), loneliness is a research topic where quantitative survey method wouldn’t suffice and hence, a qualitative study would be appropriate to understand the phenomenon closely. In the present study, grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed for two reasons: One, grounded theory approach is argued to be extremely useful in gaining insights into the complexities and intricacies of the modern organization (Corley, 2015; Fendt & Sachs, 2008). In addition, it is best suited for the inductive study of phenomena with little theoretical understanding (Corley, 2015) such as workplace loneliness.
Two, Suddaby (2006) in his editorial notes suggested that grounded theory is more appropriate when a researcher is interested in how individuals interpret reality. These orientations of grounded theory align well with the purpose of the study. Grounded theory was used to generate the theory of workplace loneliness. Moreover, this research is especially interested in understanding the experience of workplace loneliness by people from their own perspective.

3.3 METHODOLOGY

This study believes that theory emerges when the participant, context and their interpretation by the researcher interact. With this theoretical perspective, the natural emergence of theory was facilitated. The grounded theory (GT) method seems to be appropriate for these types of studies as it allows theory generation based on systematic data collection and data analysis. Interest in GT has increased among the researchers in this field. In the present work, grounded theory approach has been followed to understand loneliness in the workplace. Participants were interviewed by one of the researcher in the face to face interactions. Prior appointments from the participants were taken. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured complete anonymity of their responses. The majority of participants had a college degree. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. Data were collected in back and forth manner from 28 employees (7 women and 21 men, age range 23–58 years). Details about the participants are provided in Table 1.

All the interviews were conducted in The English language during the leisure time of the participants. The criteria of theoretical saturation were used to arrive at the sample size (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This suggests that the researcher should stop taking interviews further when the marginal contribution becomes small or no new data is generated. The duration of the interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes. The participants belong to diverse companies, different functional areas such as marketing, customer operations, finance, banking, and human
resources. The participants were selected keeping in mind their tenures, hierarchy in the organization and functional areas. The participants belong to diverse companies, different functional areas such as marketing, customer operations, finance, banking, and human resources.
Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Age (Years)</th>
<th>Total of experience (Years)</th>
<th>Participant No.</th>
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<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
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Note: M: Male, F: Female, Average age: 35.75 years
However, since people are hesitant to talk about being lonely (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992), people were selected who were somehow familiar to the researcher. This made easier for the participants to open up and share their experiences of loneliness (if any). As suggested by Tufford and Newman (2012), bracketing was done. It was conducted by asking the same questions to the interviewer before participants’ interviews were taken so that biases from preconceived notion shouldn’t occur. Following were the broad questions asked to the respondents in the qualitative study:

- How old are you? What is your total work experience? Where do you work? What is your job profile?
- How do you like your job?
- Describe your day in work?
- How often do you interact to your colleagues?
- How is your social life at workplace?
- Do you have satisfactory relationships at work or not?
- Do you feel that there are people at your workplace who understand you and your needs?
- What is the scope of interaction at your workplace?
- Do you ever feel lonely at work?
- What are the reasons behind you feeling lonely at workplace?
- What do you think can your organization do to take care of your social needs?

Since it’s a semi-structured questionnaire, the questions evolved from one respondent to another and over a period of time.

### 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY OF RESULTS

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim before data analysis. All interviews were transcribed within twenty-four hours of conducting an interview. Data coding was started after conducting seven interviews. The transcriptions were then shared by both the researchers for
coding. Coding involved a two-step process (1) independently classifying the text units in the transcript and then (2) independently coding the text units. Data was double-checked to ensure that the codes corresponded to the correct text units. After doing the coding separately, interrater reliability was checked. Guetzkow’s U (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984) was used to measure how reliably two coders broke a given body of data into the same number of units. Values of Guetzkow’s U below 0.1 are considered to indicate very high agreement. Guetzkow U value was found to be 0.053 indicating very high agreement. Subsequent coding process was continued once the interrater reliability was observed.

The key components to the methodology such as emergence, theoretical sampling, constant comparison, coding were suggested to be used in conjunction to have the best chance at an uncovering novel and theoretically interesting patterns in the data (Corley, 2015: 602). Consistent with the grounded theory process, data analysis was done on an iterative basis through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data was analyzed back and forth to generate as many emerging categories. In the first step, all the similar incidents and opinions were clustered that emerged from the transcripts. For example, responses such as “took care”, “recognize”, “interact”, and “good terms” were categorized into one theoretical category. The step was conducted on an iterative process to fit data into categories and based on the constant comparison of data, whether to keep or reject categories was decided. This was the first level category (Figure 1). Further, the first level coding was summarized into more generalizable categories. Based on the discussions with the other coder, the more abstract and normative categories were evolved, called as the theoretical category. Finally, the theoretical categories were grouped into aggregate dimensions. In this process, all the theoretical categories were demarcated into aggregate dimensions, and hence extracting them at an abstraction level from the data.
Various brainstorming sessions with peers were performed to name the categories. Since narrowing down to categories is a challenging task, keeping this in mind, the transcripts were shared with two other scholars to finalize the theoretical categories. Also, senior researchers contributed in the case of differences.

Though the research objective was to explore the factors affecting workplace loneliness, the outcomes of the phenomena were also found in the interviews. Given the seriousness with which interviewees shared their experiences of workplace loneliness, it was decided to go ahead with both the factors affecting as well as the outcomes of it. The detailed data structure is provided in Figure 1.

**Figure 3.1 DATA STRUCTURE**

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2The illustration for data structure is adapted from Gioia and Thomas (1996), Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann (2006) and Sonenshein, DeCellies and Dutton (2014).

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3.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) techniques were followed which are designed to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative findings. The technique ensures the validity of the findings of qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba highlighted the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability that ensures whether the findings are trustworthy or not. These techniques have been consistently used in many studies (see Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, Kreiner & Bishop, 2014).

Credibility ensures internal validity in qualitative research. One way to do this is to have a prolonged engagement with the sample population. For this study, one of the authors has interacted with the participants for about one year rather than just a short-term exposure.
Another manner in which credibility of the findings can be ensured is to get the approval of those who were constructed the realities being reported. For this, findings were shown to five senior professionals. All of them approved the findings, however with little additional inputs. Overall, they agreed with the findings and accepted the overall findings of factors that affect workplace loneliness. The next dimension of trustworthiness suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is transferability which ensures the external validity of the findings i.e. generalizability. This can be achieved in two ways by providing “thick description” of the findings and by applying findings beyond the studied context (Trevino et al., 2014). These techniques were followed in this study. The findings have been delineated in the later section of the study and also the generalizability has been discussed in the end section. Findings were applied in two separate samples to see the generalizability.

To ensure the stability of findings from multiple sources, the coding was done by two researchers involved in this study and further interrater reliability was calculated which calculated the percentage of agreement from two sources of coding. A high acceptance level of agreement was found. Once done with interrater reliability, final coding was done further. The last is the confirmability which is ensured by sufficient evidence that can be further used by others and also making the research process transparent so that others can follow similar research process. Confirmability was ensured by providing rich data (exemplary quotes) throughout the study.

Burke (1997) also suggested methods consistent to Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure internal validity and external validity. As suggested by Burke (1997), an ‘extended fieldwork’ has been done and instead of making own inferences, exemplary quotes of the participants have been mentioned to ensure that meaning of the data is not changed.
3.6 EVIDENCES FROM THE FIELD

Political work climate

Many of the participants mentioned that their organization has a high political environment due to which they do not feel comfortable being close to someone. Few participants expressed that higher authorities play divide and rule policies. They mentioned that people are highly selfish and self-centered. They have made groups where they don’t involve others to be a part of it. People talk behind their back and believe in cut throat competition which few participants mentioned as ‘unnecessary’. Also some participants mentioned many things such as promotions are pre decided. There is lot of uncertainty they are surrounded with. According to a few participants,

*It’s difficult to put it into words but, when people, say in higher authority decide to separate you and others do sort of alienate you, for reasons of politics in a workplace. Then, you feel lonely at that point* (Participant 6)

The organization is the concentration of political people or many minds, so then automatically some people will become lonely. They may not be lonely at their family or normal social interactions. But what happens, it is very difficult to compartmentalize into work life and home life (Participant 7).

All the abstracts and expressions were segregated in the dimensions self-interests, backstabbing, grouping and uncertainty. These dimensions were grouped into the aggregate dimension as ‘Political work climate’ (See Figure 1).

Support of leader/supervisor

Almost all the participants mentioned that role of leader is of utmost importance as boss plays a major source of support in the organization. According to the participants, if one doesn’t have a good relationship with his/her leader, it makes them feel lonely at work. Participants
mentioned that an amicable relationship with leader suffices the required social relationships at workplace. Some of them stated,

That’s one of the reasons of being lonely. If your boss is not supportive enough and cribbing on everything, then at times you feel lonely (Participant 12).

Boss plays an important role in making you lonely... When I joined in Nasik. The place was new to me, even the work. So I was not sure what I am going to do. So, in such places you have your boss. Generally in such places, he will guide. Because you will take instructions from him and he will tell you the difficulties. So I think boss is one person who can actually help you to adjust and remove your loneliness. I found at workplace that my boss took care of all my difficulties. He helped me out (Participant 16).

Participants also discussed about some of their leaders’ contribution to their jobs. Others talked about how emotional support provided by the leader is important. One participant mentioned,

When once other department people blamed me for no fault, I expected my boss to show up. But he didn’t help me at that point of time. I literally cried that day. After that I decided, never to tell him anything happening and not to trust people here... I don’t have friends in my company. So I manage to talk with my parents on the phone every day right after I leave office (Participant 18)

A few participants talked about the level of interaction they have with their leaders. Based on the responses, the abstracts and expressions of the participants were divided into the aggregate dimension ‘Support of leader/supervisor’.  
Finding value in the work

While talking to the participants, it was found that they are talking about the work they are doing in their company. They expressed feelings towards the job they are doing, in terms of they like it or not. Few participants mentioned that they don’t find value in their work. Some of them also stated that the kind of job they are doing doesn’t allow social interaction. Hence, they don’t like their jobs. As one participant states,

*We always do odd hours. We don’t get to interact with lot of people who are doing similar shifts or day shifts. At times, life is also very happening if we like what we do. Then, we work whole heartedly and we are happy doing it. But the kind of job we have to do... you aren’t able to give time to your family. It is very lonely at times* (Participant 27).

One participant perceives that if a person find his/her job worth doing, he/she doesn’t need people around. In his words,

...*You are enjoying and doing it. You don’t need a constant interaction with people, still being alone you can perform well. You can be happy also, because the work itself is giving you the happiness. So that way you are not feeling lonely because you are enjoying work* (Participant 8).

Another participant mentions that it’s very important for one to enjoy his/her job. According to her,

*I work to my satisfaction and I enjoy it which is why I have joined this profession. I think that’s important because I am fulfilling what I came here to do* (Participant 6).

Based on all the abstract statements, thought and expressions received from the interviews, the aggregate dimension was referred as ‘finding value in the work’.
**Evaluating oneself**

From the interviews, it was also identified that participants evaluate themselves in a different way. Few participants perceive that they need people around to manage situations and without people they feel lonely. Few participants mentioned that they can handle life situations and manage it on their own. They don’t need people around them. According to few participants,

So, many a times, I am able to maintain my morale. I think circumstances play a lesser role than my own internal faith... it depends upon how much importance I give to my own self. And, how much at ease I am with my decisions that way (Participant 5).

If you are inherently weak, then the locus of control is not with you... you need the mental support from the outside world. You’ll need these anchors that you need to latch on to, in terms of people. You need to lean on emotionally and which is why then these feelings come in. If you are inherently strong, you deal with it in your own ways. You don’t need others (Participant 15).

**Figure 3.2 Qualitative model of perceived loneliness at work**
While interviewing, some participants expressed themselves to be inherently strong and believe that they can deal with things in their own ways. From the interviews, it was explicit that those who are self-confident don’t need others and are comfortable without any body. They aren’t much affected without interacting with others. Based on the expressions of the participants, the aggregate dimension was categorized as ‘Evaluating oneself’.

**Sense of exhaustion**

Some of the participants mentioned that in their organization, they go through lot of stress because of peers. They also mentioned that their job is very tiring for them. Few of them explained how frustrating their job has become for them. According to one participant,

*And after every two hours, there used to be a cross location meeting. There will be at least 8-10 people. You have to answer to people, explain things to them and ask things about your job... Those meetings were very stressful. I used to take the stress over and over. I didn’t figure out any effective way of managing* (Participant 11).

Same participant also mentioned, while asked about how she used to feel in her job,

*You have to put so much of emotional involvement which was an impossible thing* (Participant 11).

Another participant mentions how her job makes her tired completely,

*Getting calls whole day... because it is very stressful. Sometimes customers are happy but not always happy and understanding. It’s a highly stressful job. Your boss can’t really take your workload* (Participant 27).

According to one more participant,

*Again... it happens if that person is not able to share. So if I’m not able to share with anybody, then it becomes a pressure cooker... when it will burst, nobody knows!* (Participant 10).
From the interviews, it was so clear that employees not just feel emotionally but also physically exhausted, when they are not able to share things. This happens not just because they lack people of their choice but also if they have not so good experiences with people. All the abstracts and expressions were segregated in the aggregate dimension ‘Sense of exhaustion’.

**Reduced affiliation with colleagues**

While talking to participants, it was found that those who perceive to be lonely have isolated themselves from their colleagues. Some of the participants talked about having no sense of connectedness with their colleagues. As one participant mentioned,

*If you are not getting support, definitely you will feel lonely at work. So, in that sense you may isolate yourself or you may tend to talk less frequently* (Participant 13).

Few of the participants mentioned that they blame themselves for the behaviour they possess and hence have detached themselves from others. As mentioned,

*I might tend to think that there is something wrong in my approach itself* (Participant 13).

*I have lost a lot of friends. So, I have always felt bad about it. And I have always tried to reflect upon how and in what context I have lost them. So, that has been always a struggle to understand. It is a very mixed feeling. You don’t know what mistake you’ve done because of that you missed people...I’m not somebody who will go out or mix with people but in that context, if you have very few people whom you mix with but then you miss them...you feel very miserable* (Participant 1).

While talking to a participant, who is a manager, mentioned how few of her subordinates whom she know closely feel lonely and have isolated themselves from others in the workplace. According to her,
They tend to keep to themselves and not talk much. And when they have to talk, they will outburst. All they pent up frustration (Participant 27).

Hence, taking all the expressions, experiences and feelings into consideration, the aggregate dimension was categorized as ‘reduced affiliation with colleagues’.

**Withdrawal intentions**

In interviews we found that those who have a feeling of loneliness are constantly talking about job change. One participant mentioned that in his old branch he had made lot of friends. However, in the new branch, which is relatively small, he has nobody to talk to. He feels that there is nobody with whom he can gel up. In his words,

*I don’t like people here. I miss my old branch. I am looking for a new job now but in that case I have to start from the scratch. I am just a management trainee* (Participant 28).

One of the participants who feels that having lack of good relationship at his work, was asked about ‘what next’, he responded saying

*So, what can I do? If it’s not working, I will just leave that organization* (Participant 7).

Another participant who mentioned that she feels left out in her organization was asked about her plans to cope up with this feeling. She exhibited,

*There is no option. What can be done? Either you have to get out of the things or get less into the things. Otherwise you are doomed* (Participant 11).

Based on the responses shared by the participants, aggregate dimension was categorized as ‘Withdrawal Intentions’.
3.7 OBSERVATIONS

Some of the observations from the qualitative study are presented below.

This study attempted to find whether people feel lonely at their workplaces or not. Almost all the participants (28 participants) reported experiencing loneliness in their workplace. This indicates the existence of loneliness as a phenomenon in the workplace.

This study attempted to find the possible factors (the ‘why’) that lead to the experience of loneliness at the workplace. It was found that both organizational, as well as personality factors, affect loneliness among employees. Based on the qualitative study it was found that political work climate in the organization, support of leader/supervisor to their employees, the way in which an employee evaluates himself/herself and whether employees find value in their work or not are some of the factors which impact employees’ experience of loneliness in the workplace.

It was also found evidence of negative consequences of employees’ experience of loneliness. Respondents hinted the possible consequences of being lonely at the workplace. It was found that sense of exhaustion, reduced affiliation with colleagues and withdrawal intentions to be some of the inevitable consequences which might affect the employees and organization as a whole.