Social Isolation

For obvious ethical reasons, researchers cannot subject human beings to experimental isolation. But research on the effects of social isolation has been conducted on nonhuman primates.

Research with monkeys. Psychologists Harry and Margaret Harlow (1962) observed rhesus monkeys whose behavior is in some ways surprisingly similar to that of human beings in various conditions of social isolation. They found that complete isolation (with adequate nutrition) for a period of even six months was sufficient to cause developmental disturbances. When reintroduced to others of their kind, these monkeys were anxious, fearful, and defenseless against aggression.

The Harlows also placed infant rhesus monkeys in cages with an artificial 'mother' constructed of wire mesh and a wooden head and the nipple of a feeding tube where the breast would be. These monkeys, too, were subsequently unable to interact with others. But when they covered the artificial 'mother' with soft terry cloth, the infant monkeys clung to it, thereby deriving some emotional benefit, which reduced developmental harm. The experiment revealed the profound importance of the simple act of cradling as part of parent-infant interaction.

Finally, the Harlows discovered that, when socially isolated for shorter periods of time (about three months), infant monkeys eventually regained normal emotional patterns after rejoining others. But they concluded that longer-term isolation causes irreversible emotional and behavioral damage.

Isolated children. The later development of Anna roughly squares with the Harlows' findings. After her discovery, Anna benefited from extensive social contact and soon showed some improvement. When Kingsley Davis (1940)revisited her after ten days, he noted that she was more alert and displayed some human expression, and even smiled with obvious pleasure. Over the next year, as she experienced the humanizing effects of socialization, Anna showed more interest in other people and gradually gained the ability to walk. After a year and a half, she was able to feed herself, walk alone for short distances, and play with toys.

Consistent with the observations of the Harlows, however, it was apparent that Anna's five years of social isolation had left her permanently damaged. At age eight her mental and social development was still below that of a normal two-year-old. Only as she approached ten did she begin to use language. Of course, since Anna's mother was mentally retarded, perhaps Anna was similarly disadvantaged. The riddle was never solved, however, because Anna died at age ten of a blood disorder, possibly related to her years of abuse (Davis, 1940).

In a more recent case of childhood isolation, a thirteen-year-old California girl was victimized in a host of ways by her parents from the age of two (Curtiss, 1977; Pines, 1981; Rymer, 1994). Genie's ordeal included being locked alone in a garage for extended periods. Upon discovery, her condition was similar to that of Anna. Genie was emaciated (weighing only fifty-nine pounds) and had the mental development of a one-year-old. She received intensive treatment by specialists and thrived physically. Yet even after years of care, her ability to use language remains that of a young child, and she lives today in a home for developmentally disabled adults.

All the evidence points to the crucial role of social experience in personality development. Human beings are resilient creatures, sometimes able to recover from even the crushing experience of prolonged isolation. But there may well be a point—precisely when is unclear from the small number of cases studied—at which isolation in infancy results in damage, including a reduced capacity for language, that cannot be fully repaired.

(Source: Macionis, J. J. (2016b). *Society: The Basics (14th Edition)* (14th ed.). Pearson.)