



RIVER VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

JC2 Preliminary Examination

GENERAL PAPER

8807/02

Paper 2

27 Aug 2019

INSERT

1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages and **1** blank page.

[Turn over]

George Monbiot writes about a crisis of loneliness...

- 1 What greater indictment of a country could there be than an epidemic of mental illness? Yet, plagues of anxiety, stress, depression, social phobia, eating disorders and self-harm now strike people down all over the world. The latest, catastrophic figures for children's mental health in England alone reflect a broader global crisis – that of loneliness. There are many secondary reasons for this crisis, but it seems to me that the underlying cause is the same everywhere: human beings, ultrasocial mammals whose brains are wired to respond to other people, are being peeled apart. 5
- 2 Economic and technological change plays a major role in this crisis, but so does ideology. Though our well-being is inextricably linked to the lives of others, everywhere we are told that we will prosper through competitive self-interest and extreme individualism. In England, we are instructed to stand on our own two feet. Employment is a fight to the near-death with a multitude of other desperate people chasing ever fewer jobs. The modern overseers of the poor tell us that dignity comes from being able to provide for our families, and they blame us for our own economic plight. The result of all this is a populace that feels alone in an intense race for individual survival. 10 15
- 3 Against this backdrop, consumerism fills the social void. But far from curing the disease of isolation, it intensifies social comparison to the point at which, having consumed all else, we start to prey upon ourselves. Networking sites online seem to cut both ways: bringing us together and driving us apart, allowing us to quantify our social standing precisely, and to see that other people have more friends and followers than we do. It helps us to stay in touch, but also cultivates a tendency to persuade our followers that we are having a great time, which surely enhances other people's sense of isolation. FOMO – fear of missing out – seems, at least in my mind, to be closely associated with loneliness. 20
- 4 It is not just about how we want others to perceive us, but how we view ourselves that exacerbates the feeling of loneliness. Many girls and young women routinely alter the photos they post, to make themselves look smoother and slimmer. Some phones, using their "beauty" settings, do it for you without asking; now you can become your own *thinspiration*. Is it any wonder, in these lonely inner worlds, where the human touch has been replaced by the retouching of photos, that young women are drowning in mental distress? A recent survey in England suggests that one in four women between 16 and 24 have harmed themselves, and one in eight now suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Anxiety, depression, phobias or obsessive compulsive disorder affect 26% of women in this age group – this is what a social health crisis looks like. And despite the agony of isolation, the chasms that have emerged between us are ever-widening. 25 30 35
- 5 There are several possible reasons for the atomisation now suffered by the supremely social mammal. Work, which used to bring us together, now disperses us, as many people have neither fixed workplaces nor regular colleagues and regular hours. Our leisure time has undergone a similar transformation – cinema replaced by television, sport by computer games, time with friends by time on Facebook. Children's lives in particular have been transformed: since the 1970s, their unaccompanied home range (in other words, the area they roam without adult supervision) has declined in Britain by almost 90 per cent. Not only does this remove them from contact with the natural world, it also limits their contact with other children. When kids played out on the street or in the woods, they quickly formed their own tribes, learning the social skills that would see them through life. These days, however, children are growing up lonelier than ever. 40 45

- 6 The word “sullen” evolved from the Old French *solain*, which means “lonely”. Loneliness is associated with an enhanced perception of social threat, so one of its paradoxical consequences is a tendency to shut yourself off from strangers. When I was lonely, I felt like lashing out at the society from which I perceived myself excluded, as if the problem lay with other people. To read any comment thread online is, I feel, to witness this tendency: you find people who are plainly making efforts to connect, but who do so by insulting and abusing, alienating the rest of the thread with their evident misanthropy. 50
- 7 If this social rupture is not treated as seriously as broken limbs, it is because we cannot see it. But neuroscientists can. A series of fascinating papers suggest that social pain and physical pain are processed by the same neural circuits. This might explain why, in many languages, it is hard to describe the impact of breaking social bonds without the words we use to denote physical pain and injury. In both humans and other social mammals, social contact reduces physical pain. This is why we hug our children when they hurt themselves: affection is a powerful analgesic. Conversely, self-harm is used as an attempt to alleviate emotional distress, an indication that physical pain is sometimes seen to be not as bad as emotional pain. As the prison system knows only too well, one of the most effective forms of torture is solitary confinement. 55
60
- 8 It is not hard to see what the evolutionary reasons for social pain might be. Survival in the wild is greatly enhanced when animals are strongly bonded with the rest of the pack. The isolated ones are most likely to be picked off by predators or to starve unnoticed. Similarly, in fragmented societies, the lone rangers drown in the torrents of society’s pressures, while social pariahs gradually fade into obscurity without so much as a whimper given in their absence. 65
- 9 It is unsurprising that social isolation is strongly associated with depression, suicide, anxiety, insomnia, fear and the perception of threat. It is more surprising to discover the range of physical illnesses it causes or exacerbates. Dementia, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, lowered resistance to viruses, even accidents, are more common among chronically lonely people. Loneliness has a comparable impact on physical health to smoking 15 cigarettes a day – it appears to raise the risk of early death by 26%. Studies in both animals and humans suggest a reason for comfort eating, as isolation reduces impulse control, leading to obesity. As those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder are the most likely to suffer from loneliness, might this provide one of the explanations for the strong link between low economic status and obesity? 70
75
- 10 Anyone can see that something far more important than most of the issues we fret about has gone wrong. So why are we engaging in this competitive, world-eating frenzy of consumerism and social dislocation, if all it produces is unbearable pain and suffering? Should this question not burn the lips of everyone in public life? There are some wonderful charities fighting this tide, but for every person they reach, several others are swept past. This crisis does not require a policy response; it requires something much bigger: the reappraisal of an entire worldview. Of all the fantasies human beings entertain, the idea that we can go it alone is the most absurd and perhaps the most dangerous. We stand together, or we fall apart. 80
85

BLANK PAGE