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Student loneliness through the pandemic: How, why and where?

Richard Phillips ⬡ | **Katie Seaborne** | **Angus Goldsmith** | **Natasha Curtis** | **Adele Davies** | **Will Haynes** | **Rose McEnroe** | **Nadia Murphy** | **Lucy O'Neill** | **Charlotte Pacey** | **Edward Walker** | **Elizabeth Wordley**

Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence
Richard Phillips, Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.
Email: R.Phillips@Sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Loneliness has emerged as a problem for individuals and society. A group whose loneliness has recently grown in severity and visibility is students in higher education. Complementing media reports and surveys of students' lockdown loneliness, this paper presents qualitative research findings on students' loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the how, why and where of student loneliness through research co-produced with undergraduate and postgraduate students. Student-researchers investigated loneliness as a function of relationships and interactions through self-interviews and peer interviews ($n = 46$) and through objects, chosen by participants to represent their experiences of lockdown. This research led to three conclusions, each with a geographical focus. First, as the spaces in which students live and study were fragmented, interactions and relationships were disrupted. Second, students struggled to put down roots in their places of study. Without a sense of belonging—to the city and institution where they studied, and the neighbourhood and accommodation where they lived—they were more likely to experience loneliness. Third, many students were unable to progress through life transitions associated with late adolescence including leaving home, learning social skills, forming sexual relationships and emerging into adulthood. Those facing bigger changes such as bereavement struggled to process these events and spoke of feeling 'neither here nor there'—in limbo. But students displayed resilience, finding ways to cope with and mitigate their loneliness. Their coping strategies speak to the efforts of policymakers and practitioners—including those in universities, government, health and wellbeing services, and accommodation services—who are seeking ways to tackle students' (and other peoples') loneliness.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, friendship, isolation, loneliness, relationships, student

1 | THE LONELINESS OF STUDENTS

> Last summer I was working in an ice-cream van, driving out to a spot near Ladybower Reservoir on the weekends. On one of my first shifts, a guy I knew stopped by for an ice cream. He requested the most boring of my selection—the 100% orange juice Del Monty [sic.]. We got chatting and I ended up getting him a job. A week later, I was training him up, laughing at his shockingly bad large 99s. We went for a date the next day, and another a few days later. On date three, he made a move, but I reluctantly backed out and raised the subject of social distancing. It was an impossible conversation. It was either to not social distance and live with the guilt of putting the vulnerable person my housemate cares for at risk, or to social distance and forfeit the natural progression of this relationship. We decided to social distance. It tore me apart. We dated for two months before calling it off as it wasn't going anywhere. (Karen)[1]

Karen was in her final year at the University of Sheffield when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. With lectures and tutorials online and student life largely on hold, Karen's experience was typical of many students around the world in the spring and summer of 2020. Her world had shrunk, such that many of the places she would have spent her days and nights – the library and Students' Union, shops and cafes, friends' houses and her new boyfriend's bedroom—were closed to her. Karen was pragmatic and resilient though, finding work that afforded some freedom, taking her to the Peak District and bringing her into contact with other people, customers and friends. Still, the shadow of a pandemic was impossible to escape. Just as Karen's life seemed to be opening up, it closed down again when she remembered the people she lived with and felt responsible for.

Karen's story speaks more generally of the obstacles that interrupt our encounters and relationships and the loneliness that can sometimes follow. Some of these obstacles to human connection are subtle, others more tangible, including the places and settings in which we can sometimes connect with others. And sometimes fail to do so. We might call these the geographies of encounters, relationships and—conversely—loneliness.

Karen's experiences were unique but not unusual. Many other students—whom we shall hear from and about in the course of this paper—experienced more sustained and difficult loneliness than she did. University students feature prominently among the stories about loneliness under lockdown that were reported in news around the world. International media covered protests by French students, highlighting the consequences of lockdown and online education for their mental health (Faridi, 2021), or the distress experienced by their counterparts in the UK, confined to their residences by fences and security guards (Johnson & Kendall, 2020; Kennelly, 2020). These stories and accompanying visuals were located in recognisable student settings: study bedrooms and halls of residence. Stereotypical though they are, these settings introduce an idea that we develop in this paper: that loneliness is not just a function of time (such as a time of life, or COVID times), but also of place.

2 | LONELINESS AND ITS GEOGRAPHIES

Campaigners and journalists have reported an 'epidemic' of loneliness (Blundell, 2015; Franklin, 2009, p. 343). Before the pandemic, the British Government had already accepted that loneliness is unhappy and unhealthy for those most directly affected and is damaging to society (Wigfield et al., 2022), publishing in 2018 what it called 'the world's first government loneliness strategy' (DCMS, 2018). These developments in the UK, led by community leader and Member of Parliament (the late) Jo Cox, have counterparts in many other parts of the world.

Loneliness has been defined as a deficit in relationships with others, a 'cognitive discrepancy' between the 'social relationships that we have, and those that we want' (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 31). Jenny de Jong Gierveld (1998), points to 'a situation experienced by the individual ... where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships' (quoted by Griffin, 2010, p. 3). Understood in this way, loneliness is distinct from being alone (Russell et al., 2012). A person can be alone without being lonely. And it is possible to feel lonely while in the presence of others, including acquaintances, friends, partners and family members. These definitions and distinctions have been widely adopted by charities, policymakers (DCMS, 2018) and researchers too, who have made great progress in measuring and mapping loneliness.

Building upon foundational theoretical and empirical work by social psychologists, an increasingly diverse group of researchers across the social sciences and humanities have started to explore the ideas and practices that can lead to—or away from—loneliness (Russell et al., 2012). Doing so, they are increasingly focusing upon the social norms

and ideals that people use to weigh up their relationships and encounters. These norms include judgements about how many friends is enough, how often friends should see each other, what friends should talk about and what we should do together (Wawera & McCamley, 2020, p. 1263). These standards vary from place to place, over time and through the life cycle (Alberti, 2019). We tend to feel lonely when our interactions fall short of the norms and ideals we share with our peers and carry with us: when we feel deprived of 'meaningful interactions' (Wigfield et al., 2022, p. 17). These interactions include contact with other individuals, participation in groups and organisations, and engagement with communities and places.

Academic, government and third sector researchers have conducted detailed studies of the loneliness experienced by students during the pandemic. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and National Union of Students (NUS) surveyed upwards of 100,000 students to measure the extent and impacts of their loneliness at this time (Johnson & Kendall, 2020; ONS, 2020). Their findings agreed with other research demonstrating that young people (aged 16–24)—including students (Oakley, 2020)—are particularly susceptible to loneliness (Bache & Burns, 2021; Batsleer & Duggan, 2020; Dickinson, 2019). They have established that the consequences of loneliness are wide ranging and serious: for mental and physical health and wellbeing (McIntyre et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2019); academic performance and progression (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020); student experience (What Works, 2020) and happiness (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). We contribute to this growing literature on student loneliness and loneliness more generally, venturing two broader contributions.

First, we explore new ways of researching loneliness. Reflecting its origins in psychology, this field has been informed largely by questionnaire surveys and (loneliness) scales, which have been used to measure and map loneliness. Researchers in other disciplines—including sociology, anthropology, history and education—have diversified this methodological palette, investigating loneliness through interviews, ethnographies and archives. We continue in this direction, presenting and encouraging research that is not just about the people (individuals and groups) experiencing loneliness, but also *by* them. And we propose innovative means of breaking the silences and navigating the stigma surrounding this delicate subject. Doing so, we take inspiration from others who have found novel ways to explore and express their experiences of lockdown. We think particularly of the people who kept 'lockdown diaries', using the written word, blogs, sound recordings, photography and other media to document their experiences and observations. Steeped in specifics, their diaries speak to broader issues such as coping strategies (Ward, 2020) and mental health struggles (Halliday, 2022). They amplify voices that are less often heard, including those of children and young people (Procentese et al., 2021). We share the ethos of these lockdown diarists in exploring ways for people to speak directly about their sometimes lonely lives and experiences.

Our second contribution is geographical. We build upon foundational work by others—which asks where people are more likely to feel lonely (ONS, 2020, 2021)—by exploring geographical drivers of loneliness. We begin with the tangible settings of everyday life, where human encounters can take place. For students, these include houses and flats, bedrooms, kitchens, streets and parks, online spaces, pubs and clubs, places of paid and voluntary work, buses and trains, parental homes, churches and community centres. Second, we turn to imaginative geographies: belonging and attachment to place. Where people feel they belong, they are more likely to reach out to others and less likely to feel lonely. Third, we focus upon places where life transitions and momentous events—defining experiences including sexual awakening and bereavement—occur. At these times we have complex needs both for solitude and connection, and are prone to a complex mix of intimacy and loneliness so it matters greatly where we are and who we are with. In these times and places, we also begin to glimpse the complexity of loneliness which emerges not simply as a singular threat but rather a more nuanced experience: part of life to be understood, mitigated and navigated.

3 | CO-PRODUCED RESEARCH

Co-produced research brings participants to the heart of enquiry, breaking down traditional divisions between researchers and informants, researchers and beneficiaries, findings and applications (Kindon et al., 2007; McNally, 2017). In this spirit, we have designed research that is not only about but also by and for students (Brown, 2019). The students involved in this project range from first year undergraduates to postgraduates at masters and doctoral level. Co-production encompasses a continuum between projects that are fully owned and directed by participants and those that involve the latter in more limited and prescribed ways. Participants stand to benefit from their ownership of research findings and their experience of the research process. The student-researchers in this project stood to benefit by gaining skills and—crucially important after a year of online learning and constrained student

life—connecting with each other. Their wider community, including other students, also stood to benefit if the findings of their research could be shared and heard by those in positions of authority, such as the student accommodation and wellbeing service providers whose decisions during and after COVID influence students' chances to interact and build relationships.

How did we work together? The first steps were taken by Richard, who reached out to students through a student community group: the University of Sheffield Geography Society. After an initial meeting with interested students, where Richard explained some preliminary aims and then suggested how co-production might work, 11 students signed up. These students were in different years of study and encompassed a mix of ages and courses, along with other differences including gender, ethnicity, nationality and accommodation. A small research internship grant made it possible to employ two of these students—Katie and Angus—to train and support the other students and to help collate and analyse findings. We met to discuss what we wanted to do and how, agreeing on three research questions:

1. How and why have students in higher education experienced loneliness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What geographical factors—including material, practical and metaphorical barriers to forming and performing relationships—have led to loneliness in this context?
3. What might be done, practically and feasibly, to reduce students' loneliness? What might be done to remove barriers between students and to support them as they interact and build and maintain relationships?

Richard proposed the use of interviews in two forms—self-interviews (Stoodley, 2020) and peer interviews—and drafted an interview schedule, which we collectively workshopped, piloted, and edited. Throughout, we recognised the sensitivities surrounding this stigmatised subject that many people find hard to admit, even to ourselves. Accordingly, we explored indirect and gentle lines of enquiry. We allowed interviewees to speak as much—or as little—as they wished, not probing too hard. 'Loneliness leads me to struggle with my emotions', one first-year student confided (14). The student conducting this interview left space for this interviewee to expand, but did not push her to do so. Others betrayed their loneliness less directly. Asked whether he feels he belongs in his household, Mike hesitated and shifted in his seat, starting his sentence a few times before backtracking and trying again: 'I don't really know how to answer that. I belong because I pay to live there, sure' (27). Designing and conducting research in this way—in which students were able but not pressed to express their experiences—we respond to Liz Bondi's call to pay attention when people express emotions (Bondi, 2005).

An unexpected aspect of this project, which developed during the collaborative research process, emerged from a partnership with the Science Museum in London. This began when one student introduced us to a curator who was leading the national 'Collecting COVID-19' project (https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/project/collecting-covid-19/) and was interested in collecting more on student experiences of COVID. Following a series of discussions, we agreed to elicit and collect two kinds of objects: notebooks in which students would record and reflect upon their interviews in their own handwriting, and items that they chose to reflect their pandemic year. In this way we arrived at a third research method, informed by cultural and museum studies (Holmes, 2020; Woodward, 2019) and shaped by the serendipity of co-production, which took the form of object elicitation.

Throughout, we agreed that we wanted to involve a broad cross-section of students rather than just those who self-identify as particularly lonely. Looking at 'normal' levels of loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), we depart from other studies that focus upon young people experiencing acute loneliness (e.g., Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). Reflecting the scale of the project and in the interests of focus, we made the decision to work with higher education students studying at different institutions in one city: Sheffield. We sought participants in different stages of study at undergraduate and postgraduate level (during the 2020–2021 academic year); those in different forms of accommodation including residences, shared houses and family homes (Holton & Finn, 2020); on different courses; and domestic and international students Sawir et al., 2008. We tried to reach out to as diverse a group as possible, encompassing other differences including gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Holton & Riley, 2013). The final list of participants is shown in Table 1, where they are identified by a number, by the pseudonym they chose, and by their level of study: undergraduate (UG1-4), masters (PGT) and doctoral (PGR).

TABLE 1 Student researchers (names in bold) and participants, all anonymised

No.	Name: pseud.	Role in project	Level of study	Course	Gender	UK/home / overseas	Accommodation
1	Marvin	Researcher	1	Geography	Male	UK	Student accommodation
2	Blake	Participant	2	Economics	Male	UK	Student accommodation
3	Amanda	Participant	1	Law	Female	UK	Student accommodation
4	Gwenth	Participant	1	Biomedicine	Female	UK	Student accommodation
5	Ray	Researcher	4	Geography	Male	UK	Private housing
6	Bowser	Participant	4	History +year abroad	Male	UK	Private housing
7	Medusa	Participant	3	Geography	Female	UK	Private housing
8	Luke	Participant	PGT1	Mechanical Engineering	Male	UK	Private housing
49	Emily	Participant	2	Environmental Science	Male	Overseas	Private housing
50	Emilia	Participant	3	Geography	Female	UK	Private housing/home
9	Lily	Researcher	1	Geography	Female	UK	Student accommodation
10	Chloe	Participant	1	Criminology	Female	UK	Student accommodation
11	Adam	Participant	1	Philosophy	Male	UK	Student accommodation
12	Amy	Participant	1	Sociology and Criminology	Female	UK	Living at home with parents
13	Gary	Researcher	1	Geography	Female	UK	Student accommodation
14	Jessica	Participant	1	East Asian Studies	Female	UK	Private housing
15	Roboute	Participant	1	Aerospace Engineering	Male	UK	Student accommodation
16	Barry M	Participant	1	History and English	Male	Overseas	Student accommodation
17	Lauren	Researcher	2	BSc Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
18	George	Participant	2	Geography	Male	UK	Lives with parents
19	Jennifer	Participant	2	Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
20	Lisa	Participant	2	Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
21	Marie	Researcher	1	Geography	Female	UK	At home student
22	Daisy	Participant	1	Geography	Female	UK	Student accommodation
23	Lottie	Participant	1	Geography	Female	UK	Student accommodation
24	Brian	Participant	1	Geography	Female	Uk	Student accommodation
25	Karen	Researcher	3	Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
26	Lucy	Participant	1	Music	Female	UK	Student accommodation
27	Mike	Participant	3	Geography	Male	UK	Private (shared) housing
28	Naomi	Participant	3	Architecture	Female	Overseas	Private (shared) housing
29	Larissa	Researcher	2	Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
30	Anna	Participant	2	Geography	Female	UK	Lives at home with parents
31	Nina	Participant	2	Law with German Law	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
32	Max	Participant	3	Modern History	Male	UK	Private (shared) housing
33	Sarah	Researcher	1	Geography	Female	UK	Student accommodation
34	Ian	Participant	1	Business Studies	Male	UK	Student accommodation

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Name: pseud.	Role in project	Level of study	Course	Gender	UK/home / overseas	Accommodation
35	Ryan	Participant	1	Architectural Engineering	Male	UK	Student accommodation
36	Sam	Participant	1	Biomedical Science	Male	UK	Student accommodation
41	Evelyn	Researcher	4	Geography	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
42	Janine	Participant	4	Law with Spanish Law	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
43	Melissa	Participant	3	English Literature	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
44	Becky	Participant	2	Philosophy	Female	UK	Private (shared) housing
45	Claire	Researcher	PGR2	PhD Geography	Male	UK	Private accommodation
46	Robyn	Participant	PGR1	PhD Urban Planning	Female	Overseas	Private (shared) accommodation
47	Lance	Participant	PGR2	PhD History	Male	UK	Private accommodation
48	Roberto	Participant	PGR2	PhD Geography	Male	Overseas	Private (shared) accommodation

4 | FINDINGS: SPACES OF RELATIONSHIPS, INTERACTIONS, AND LONELINESS

Lauren felt 'lonely and without friends' for much of her second year at university (17). Many other students had similar experiences. Hearing from them, we will see how students felt lonely during the pandemic, and also catch glimpses of how many have been lonely before and after that unusual time. We will ask how and why they experienced loneliness, and also where. Focusing upon the where, we explore the real and imagined geographical settings that variously constrain and enable their relationships and interactions. We identify three geographies of loneliness. First, the spaces in which students live their everyday lives: where they work and study, socialise and interact. Second, students' attachments to places and senses of belonging. Third, the spaces and relations that are important to students undergoing life transitions.

4.1 | 'Confined to my room'—constrained and fragmented lives

At the end of her first year, Daisy said she missed friends she had still to meet (22). Others missed friends they were unable to see due to COVID-related restrictions on travel and social gathering, and rules about isolation, quarantine and social distancing. These restrictions and rules eroded and undermined many students' relationships. Some felt sustained by absent friends. Adam, a first year philosopher, distinguished between the potentially deep loneliness of having nobody and the mere 'boredom' of not being with friends (11). For others, not being able to see friends or do things together was a bigger problem. These students implicitly mobilised a more practical understanding of friendship, consistent with political theorist and philosopher Danielle Allen's (2004: xxi) argument that 'friendship is not an emotion, but a practice'. For Allen, friends are what friends do, for and with each other, emotionally and practically. Restrictions on where these students could go and whom they could meet effectively curtailed their friendships.

Students experienced these restrictions differently, depending upon chance and personality. Those lucky enough to find themselves with compatible housemates fared better than others. So did those with more interest in the quality than the quantity of their relationships, the intimacy rather than the scale of their social lives. Bowser appreciated the 'positive regularity' of shared meals (6). Melissa, living with friends in her third year, felt 'pushed together like a family'. When their 'lives outside the house' were taken away, they began to 'treat each other like siblings' who had 'lost any air of social niceties' but found a greater intimacy, the 'savageness that comes from a place of love' (43). Not everyone had chosen the people they were living with. Marvin (1), in university accommodation in his first year, chose to make the best of things. He and his housemates adapted some of the rituals and pleasures of student life. He chose a shot glass—brought out on Friday evenings—to represent this time, when some friendships germinated and others grew stronger (Figure 1).

Though a minority were able to flourish in these conditions, many struggled. Some households seemed to close in upon their occupants. The crowded and scruffy conditions of many student houses—with little or no outside space and

FIGURE 1 Marvin saved this shot glass as a reminder of Friday nights in. 'It was always fun to have an event to look forward to at the end of the week, even it was just in our kitchen'

uncomfortable communal areas and bathrooms—mattered more when everyone was forced to stay home. Luke struggled without a garden (8), and Lauren said she felt 'confined to [her] room' (17), eating most of her meals there. Relationships were strained by residents' conflicting attitudes towards their living space and their conduct during the pandemic. When Lauren's housemates organised parties, she felt she had to stay in her room because she did not 'want to be involved' or implicated (17). These pressures put relationships under pressure and brought conflicts to the surface. Issues that housemates might not have noticed in the past caused a 'stress-test on relationships' that not all survived (42). 'I'd never seen my friends put to the moral test like this', Melissa explained. She found herself asking whether a fellow student was 'showing their true nature as a selfish person, or are they just reacting to extreme pressure in an unexpected way?' (43). As their houses were cut off from the outside world, some students also experienced new pressures, including responsibility for vulnerable housemates. One spoke of a particularly harrowing experience where a boy in their flat was struggling with his mental health and mentioned that the university did not really help and they were left to help him. This first year student understated the stress this caused, describing it as 'quite bad actually', and adding that the boy eventually left and didn't return (24). And recall Karen's story—quoted at the beginning of this article—about the responsibility she felt for a vulnerable person, cared for by a member of her household. To safeguard them, Karen distanced herself from a new boyfriend, sacrificing the relationship that might have developed (25). Other students, neither at odds with housemates nor responsible for them, simply felt dissatisfied with them. A postgraduate said he felt 'starved of contact and connection' and 'frustrated with the lack of intimacy', despite living in a house with 14 others (48). A postgraduate living alone—as many do (Janta et al., 2014)—was prone to a different kind of loneliness, feeling 'adrift' (45). These contrasting experiences—some students feeling lonely in a crowd, others lonely in isolation—resonate with Perlman and Peplau's (1981, p. 31) argument that loneliness springs from 'a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships' we have and those that we want or feel we need (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). For some, the problem is quantity, for others quality, though the end result can be much the same.

As the spaces in which students lived their lives fragmented, so did their friendships, groups and networks, which became increasingly 'intermittent' and inconsistent, thin and strained (49). Students responded to these constraints in different ways, some actively working harder and more strategically at relationships, others withdrawing and giving up. Lucy, who did not bond with housemates, reached out more widely. 'I was that really annoying person on group chats messaging like *hey do you wanna go and get coffee?*' The student who interviewed her 'got the impression that this was extremely hard work, no matter how much she tried to sugar coat it' (26). Though Lucy was working to build and maintain relationships, her life was heavily constrained. Students, like other young people, normally rely upon a range of public places and non-commercial spaces to meet and interact with others. Without access to these settings, they can struggle to maintain relationships and miss out on interactions that can keep loneliness at bay (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). During the pandemic, the lack of access to space in which to interact outside the house—including entertainment venues, study spaces and social settings such as student societies—further eroded the horizons of many students. Lance (47) was frustrated to not have anywhere to socialise; he missed the pub, while other students missed the student societies in which they would normally hope to meet others.

Friendship networks and groups were curtailed and some individuals excluded by restrictions on the size of gatherings and rules about household mixing. Marvin explained that 'the rule of six has also been limiting in making friendship groups very cliquey' (1). Restrictions on travel and gatherings had particularly severe consequences for students who were not living with their closest friends. An international student without a 'coherent group' said he felt permanently 'on the side-lines' (49). It was not just the international students who lived spatially distributed lives. Many UK students depend upon networks of friends and family, which reach beyond their place of study (Holton, 2019). Conscious of this during lockdown, Amy felt forced to make a choice. Seeing how much she relied on her 'safety net' and 'support system' at home, she made the decision to move home for the lockdown, though this came at the expense of her student life (12).

Many students ended the year with fewer friends than they had started out with or, if they were first years, with fewer than they might have otherwise found. Some actively ended friendships and prioritised others; some found themselves dropped or excluded. Emilia 'clamped down on [her] relationships', becoming more selective and explicitly thinking 'this is who I choose to spend my time with' (50). The shifting dynamics of friendship in which only the resilient remain worked best for those who valued the quality over the quantity of their relationships. For some, the latter was important for their wellbeing and academic progress (see McIntyre et al., 2018). When 'uni wasn't great' (49) the 'social side' and student experience would carry them through.

These experiences bring into focus the ways in which meaningful encounters that keep loneliness at bay—from casual interactions on the street to sustained and routine contact with friends and family—are variously enabled and constrained by where we are. This is not to say that proximity to others is enough on its own. It is possible to feel lonely in a crowd, as Georg Simmel (1903) argued in his influential essay on modern urban life, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. Cities can be lonely places, in which people struggle to connect with each other (Hertz, 2020). But cities can also be sociable places where we benefit from being together, encountering each other in streets and parks, shops and places of worship, where we begin to recognise some people and make friends with others (Phillips & Evans, 2018; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). So, though co-presence is not enough to draw people together, the lack of such presence can stand between us. Where people do not feel safe to go out or when they cannot afford to, they are more likely to feel lonely (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020; Weijs-Perrée et al., 2015). And, where people are kept apart by official guidelines and rules, as students were during lockdown, this forced separation can also exacerbate loneliness. This is what many students—and others too—reported experiencing during lockdown.

4.2 | 'Neither here nor there'—belonging and place

Sarah's 'globe stress ball' reminded her of the isolation and anxiety she experienced during her first year. She received it on a lonely day: a 19th birthday in isolation. Sarah had only just started university when COVID restrictions forced her to quarantine and lockdown with people she had not chosen. Her first year was 'difficult and stressful' and she often 'felt lonely', feeling she didn't belong with her flatmates. She found the communal areas 'disgusting' and 'hated going into the kitchen'. She 'used to listen through the door to check that no one was in there first' (33). But the outward-looking object symbolises Sarah's desire to reach out, and her receptiveness when others reached out to her. She treasures it because it was given to her by a student society she was keen to encounter and it seemed a promise of friendship and community to come. The globe also represents Sarah's chosen subject and her 'strong interest in the world' (33). On each of these levels, the globe speaks of tentative belonging (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 Sarah received a globe stress ball in a care package from students she had yet to meet, when she spent a birthday quarantined in her study bedroom

Sarah's instinct and optimism—that she would find a community and place in which to belong—resonates with research that finds an inverse relationship between belonging and loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007; Tomaney, 2015). Where we feel a strong sense of belonging—to our homes, neighbourhoods, cities, institutions and communities—we are more likely to venture out and interact with others and less likely to experience loneliness (DCLG, 2008; Mayblin et al., 2016; Wigfield et al., 2022). Many students actively invest in the places, communities and institutions where they study, actively homemaking and engaging with others around them and being receptive when others reach out to them (Holton & Riley, 2016). Their efforts are often rewarded, in what become virtuous circles of belonging, finding what the author, playwright and journalist Marina Keegan (2014, p. 1) once called the 'opposite of loneliness'. Reflecting on her own student days, Keegan found this difficult to pin down: 'not quite love' and 'not quite community', a 'feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together' (Keegan, 2014, p. 1). So it is crucial for students to feel they belong and to develop and sustain feelings of attachment to the places, communities and institutions where they study (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Conversely, where students struggle to put down roots, the absence or erosion of belonging can lead to a spiral of loneliness.

During the pandemic, many returning students felt their already tenuous attachments to the places where they lived and studied were slipping away, and new students found these attachments had simply failed to develop. They alluded to everyday experiences that can bring belonging into focus. These experiences are not limited to deep and lasting friendships. They also include much more fleeting encounters. Speaking of what they missed during the pandemic, many students affirmed and explained the value they attach to the presence of others in their daily lives: the reassuring presence of strangers; half recognising people on the street; little encounters with acquaintances. Roberto (48) missed the sociability of public transport when lockdown was in force, saying how he missed 'speaking to random people on the train'. Janine missed running into people she half knows. As fewer people recognised and greeted her on the street, she felt her sense of belonging slipping away, even before she had graduated (42). This creeping detachment from place and community left some students feeling alienated from the places where they live. A research student who had felt 'closer' to Sheffield at the start of the pandemic explained that for him attachment to place is not all about social connectivity, but knowing the roads and the parks and the neighbourhoods, and spending time there (45). Increasingly conscious of what they were missing, some of the students we interviewed spoke of the pleasures of little encounters, of exchanging a few words with strangers and running into acquaintances who one might know and like, but not well enough to arrange to meet. The research student, living alone, recalled a moment in a church where he felt a sense of connection to a stranger (45). 'I am not religious', he explained, 'although I like visiting churches. When they reopened I enjoyed being there and walking around with other visitors. I had one visit to a local chapel and there was a woman praying in there and I felt like we shared a nice quiet moment in this special sacred place'. This feeling of connection—the company of strangers—can also come from crowded places. Cafés helped Robyn (46) cope with the solitude of her postgraduate studies. She had not felt the need to meet others there, but liked feeling connected to them. 'I used to work from cafes. It creates a feeling of being surrounded by people even when I'm alone'.

For students, given the changes taking place in their lives and the brevity of their time at university, belonging is often fragile, in flux and rarely taken for granted (Smith et al., 2014). Student communities are inherently transitory, as are

areas with large numbers of students, so there are reasons to expect students and others in student areas to experience this species of loneliness. Mike, in his third year, declared that he was 'definitely a student, not a permanent resident' and acknowledged that 'it was always only gonna be 3 years and it would take a lot longer to feel part of a community' (27). This worsened in the pandemic when students' movements became increasingly erratic and ambiguous, driven by changing and unpredictable travel restrictions and by the way in which university accommodation was managed. When universities announced that there would be rent rebates for students who had not been able to return when a major lockdown began (in January 2021), some students became deliberately vague about their whereabouts 'in order to get their rent back'. First years in residences described an 'unsettling' atmosphere (9), when they felt 'neither here nor there' (33). Many felt adrift in terms of their life plans, their place within the university, and their standing in relation to friends and communities. A second year international student described this fragile sense of belonging, which he felt slipping away. 'The reason I ever felt I belonged in Sheffield was because of friends. Now they're leaving, my sense of belonging is leaving too' (49).

While some students found ways to actively connect with their neighbourhoods and with the city, and while some did so with student societies and academic departments, their relationships with larger entities and communities tended to decline and failed to develop. Medusa, having spent most of her final year at home outside Sheffield, conveyed the awkward distance that had grown up between her and her university: an 'institution beyond my capacity to be involved' (7). Some students said they felt alienated from their university because it felt too distant, and had not done enough to care for them, or show it cared. This is not the whole picture and not every student felt this way. Jessica said 'the university has been helpful' and made her feel 'comfy here' and 'strongly feel connected to Sheffield' (14). For some though, a limited sense of institutional belonging added to their loneliness.

Some students remained open, receptive to others. Sarah's delight in receiving the globe illustrates this. Others actively reached out. Amy found student societies that connected her 'to the uni in another way other than just academically' (20). Some took paid or voluntary work as a legitimate way of connecting with others. Volunteering at a food bank brought Medusa into contact with people across the community, playing an 'absolutely massive' part in her life. With access to a van and deliveries to make, Medusa found that her 'social life was never confined to the house' (7). She met new people and felt 'valued'. Luke, who also volunteered at the food bank (Foodhall) and at Student Action for Refugees (STAR), agreed that this brought him into contact with 'people he wouldn't normally meet'. He encountered others 'with different interests and backgrounds, notably refugees' (8). This was about the number of his contacts and also the range, and it reached beyond friendship to wider relationships across the community. Others actively invested in their communities in other ways. Bowser, who lives in an area with few students, said he had organised events for neighbours, such as a public meeting with a local MP. He claimed that the neighbours 'want to do a barbecue and street party for us when we leave' (6). Meanwhile, many students continued paid work during the crisis, some as key workers. For Emilia, paid work was about much more than the pay, and the need she felt for social contact; she also acted out of a sense of social responsibility (50). The object she chose to represent her year? A pair of the pressure tights she used in her role as a care worker (50).

4.3 | 'I was stuck'—time and space for life transitions

Loneliness can be pronounced in certain stages of life, particularly times of change such as adolescence, sexual awakening, marriage, migration, retirement, life-changing illness, and bereavement (DCMS, 2018). This is not necessarily a bad thing. A degree of separation from everyday life—with its supports but also its constraints—is a crucial part in transitioning from one identity or life stage to another. But our needs for other people are complex—sometimes contradictory—at these times. Students, experiencing important life transitions, need personal space but they also need relationships (Holdsworth, 2009; Thomas et al., 2020). Many find it easier, happier and less perilous to negotiate these life changes and challenges—variously enjoying, coping, exploring and understanding them—in the presence of others. Without this contact, they risk a particularly toxic form of loneliness (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

The loneliness experienced by students at particularly significant times in their lives, which coincided with the pandemic, mattered for three reasons. First, this loneliness was a sadness in itself. Qualitatively different from some other—perhaps more fleeting or superficial—experiences of loneliness, this was too much of the wrong kind of loneliness, and as such it cut particularly deep. Second, this loneliness belied and undermined the 'student experience', which they had been sold and had bought into when they decided to go to university and which they were paying for with their fees. Students do not consume this experience passively. The 'student experience' requires active

participation and the performance of student life reaching far beyond the classroom and degree result. Pressure to perform this demanding part—comprising exacting social norms and ideals—adds to the anxiety experienced by many, constantly reminding them of their social shortcomings (see Schultz & Moore, 1988). This social self-consciousness is a source of loneliness, of wanting more and better interactions than one has because the bar for social success has been set unrealistically high.

Third, the loneliness experienced by some students at this important time mattered because it blocked them, stalling their growth and interrupting their transitions. Explaining why we need other people to make it through these times, Danielle Allen argues that 'friendship begins in the recognition that friends' experience 'common events, climates, built-environments, fixations of the imagination, and social structures' (Allen, 2004, p. xxi). With friends and other acquaintances, students learn and practice social and life skills, forming and performing identities; they share common challenges, ranging from coping with academic work to managing money. Many younger students were conscious of their need to learn social skills—for meeting new people, learning to communicate, learning about relationships of all kinds—and were aware that they were missing opportunities to do this. Chloe felt that although she had been able to 'find her people' and gain some security, that was only the first step and it would still be a challenge to get close to new friends and move forward with them (10). Some older students, who had learned some of these skills before COVID, worried that without practice they might regress. Roberto referred to 'social rustiness' and saw it in others. 'I was at a party recently', he confided, 'and everyone seemed really socially incapable' (48). Cut off from others, many students were unable to progress through these stages in their lives, or to cope with bigger and less predictable events, which they may be experiencing for the first time. As one put it, 'I was stuck really and couldn't progress'. And, switching to the present tense in the interview, conducted at the end of the academic year in which the pandemic peaked, 'I feel trapped' (14). For this student and for many others, time had lost its shape and direction, becoming monotonous. Sarah, who received the stress ball as part of a care package, should have been celebrating her 19th birthday but was alone in her room without any way of marking time and *becoming* 19.

For those seeking simply to grow up at their own speed in the company of other young people, this was frustrating. For others, facing and having to cope with other circumstances and events, the sense of entrapment was more difficult. When her mother had a 'mental breakdown', Medusa became a carer during her final year. 'It felt like everything was on hold for that time', she recalled, as her own needs and desires came second (7). Ray, whose mother died at this time, struggled to mourn her and felt disconnected from the 'student experience' and from other students, feeling that he had lost his 'anchors' in life. Though this would have been terrible in any circumstances, COVID restrictions made matters worse, adding to his sense of dislocation and stasis (Figure 3). Still, as he baked bread, Ray found a way to remember his mother and connect with housemates:

> I had been a competent chef before lockdown, but like most of the country, I decided to take up baking. This has particular sentiment for me, as five years prior to the first lockdown, my mum had enrolled me in a breadmaking course for my birthday. I really enjoyed it, and Mum had all the ingredients bought and stocked in the cupboard by the time I got home, surely anticipating me to make bread again. I never did, until the first lockdown. Mum was in a neuro-intensive care unit at the time, and I wasn't allowed to see her because of COVID—her absence of responsiveness meant that the times where I could touch her physically were the only real moments of 'connection' I could have. I compromised, and baking bread produced some sort of connection that I was missing. Following her death in summer 2020, and throughout the academic year, I made bread whenever I was lonely, usually missing her. The effects of lockdown and grief fused together, becoming difficult to disentangle from both one another and the smell of freshly baked bread which permeated throughout the house. (5).

Some other students spoke of ways in which they were able to move forward, albeit in small ways, when their relationships and interactions were subjected to the 'COVID stress test'. Forced to decide whom they really wanted to see, some made hard decisions about their social lives. At a time when it became impossible to perform 'the student experience' or maintain an aspirational social life, some students found they were content without either and gained the confidence to reject norms and ideals, and then to set their own standards. Suddenly, it was okay to stay in on a Saturday night, to spend more time alone, and to have a small social circle. When COVID rules prevented Emilia from seeing friends, she found she missed them less than she had expected. Gradually, she started 'choosing myself'. Without the option or pressure to be seeing people and doing things every night, it became easier for her to spend time by herself and not feel guilty about it (50).

FIGURE 3 Ray chose a yeast tin to represent the mixed emotions he experienced during COVID times. Baking bread, he remembered and mourned his mother, who encouraged him in the kitchen, and reached out to housemates, who would eat with him

Janine began her final year in what she believed was a solid friendship group. Unexpectedly, one of her friends dropped her. 'She just stopped talking to me' (42). Janine withdrew 'because it was hurting' and 'the relationship faded away pretty rapidly'. Looking back, she had found this 'pretty hard', having 'expected her to be in my life forever', but she also reflected that she had learned from the experience, and become more realistic about what to expect from others, hardened and more pragmatic about friendship. Having clearly thought a lot about the relationships, and read up about 'different love languages' that people bring to their relationships, Janine came to see that she needed a kind of 'affirmation' that others do not want or know how to give (42). Difficult though this was, Janine tried to learn from it and ended up feeling that she had grown through it.

Some other friendships, surviving stress tests, brought rewards and lessons. Feeling closer than ever to 'her closest girlfriends', as well as to 'the boys of the house', Medusa experienced increased intimacy and felt that 'we learned a lot about each other and ourselves' (7). Larissa found she 'started to question' her understandings and expectations of friendship over lockdown, distinguishing between relationships and jettisoning those that seemed 'superficial' (29). Others spoke of differentiating between friends and acquaintances, investing more in the former (49) but also recognising their need for both, and their need to tolerate some imperfect friendships, which provided companionship and contact (31). Contrary to some stereotypes, it was not just female students who reflected on their relationships. Max came to realise how much he valued some friendships and, as he put it, 'how badly I want them to stay in my life' (32). He gave a lot of thought to his different relationships, getting on with housemates 'in different ways' while recognising that 'the social aspect' was nothing like other years and not enough for him. So COVID had not completely stalled everyone's student transitions and lives, even though its lessons were often harsh, and though the transitions it afforded could be lonely.

5 | CONCLUSION: STUDENT VOICES AND LONELINESS STRATEGIES

We have seen that students experienced intense loneliness during the pandemic, hearing about this in their own words and exploring some of the reasons for it. This loneliness is a function of relationships and interactions, grounded in a series of real and imagined geographies. We reached three sets of findings. First, though some students were more open than others about feeling lonely, many did experience loneliness, exacerbated by the fragmentation of the spaces in which they live and study. Second, students' connections and identifications with place were eroded

at multiple scales, including the city, institution, neighbourhood and home. Belonging less, they were less likely to interact and more likely to experience loneliness. Third, many students were unable to progress through life transitions associated with late adolescence, including leaving home, learning social skills, forming sexual relationships and emerging into adulthood.

Our findings inform broader understandings of the geographies—geographical causes and expressions—of loneliness. We have identified drivers of loneliness in the form of geographical factors shaping and sometimes limiting relationships and interactions. These relationships and interactions are not only performed through and in places; they are also with and about such places. First, the material geographies of everyday life variously enable and inhibit relationships and interactions, which are important influences on whether or not an individual feels lonely. Second, attachment and belonging to places point to a second geographical dimension of loneliness: the significance of imaginative geographies. Third, loneliness is also affected by access to the spaces needed for life transitions. These broader conclusions identify some threads in a broader geography of loneliness, to which we contribute through this paper, and which we encourage others to continue to develop and build up through a range of empirical and theoretical means.

While we have heard about the loneliness of students, this has not been the end of the story. Most students speak of what they have done about their loneliness and how they have tried to work through it. Here, our research resonates with findings of pre-COVID studies showing how students have coped with isolation (Janta et al., 2014), negotiating constraints and identifying resources and opportunities for connecting with others (Vasileiou et al., 2019). The objects that the students chose to represent their COVID year register difficulties alongside positive experiences and coping strategies. Resourceful and resilient, to a point, students came up with the best responses to their own loneliness, even if their answers were not always enough and even though this was still a bad and a hard year. Making bread in order to remember, mourn and feel close to a parent, while connecting with housemates who share the food. Thinking through friendships that have gone wrong. Organising nights to look forward to in a marooned student house. Marvin's shot glass (Figure 1) and Sarah's globe stress ball (Figure 2) speak of students responding to their own loneliness, acknowledging but also doing something about it. Another form of resilience is evident in the object chosen by a research student who lived alone through much of their COVID year (Figure 4). This small screwdriver speaks of mixed experiences: recognising the privileges of privacy and space, feeling lonely nevertheless, and developing a kind of self-reliance. Claire explained:

> It's a rather uninteresting plastic and rusty metal object that I've had lying around my flat in the last year, putting it to use. It signifies being stuck indoors and attempting to fix (or failing to fix) household or other things that need maintaining. 2020 was spent mostly alone and self-reliance has become one of the most important things. In a literal and figurative sense, it has been learning to use a rather different set of tools and setting a number of different priorities in life. For example, I had counselling and worked on mental health difficulties for the first time, and also engaged more with family. (45)

These stories suggest that if student loneliness is a problem to be solved, the people best placed to find solutions are students themselves. Some were critical of solutions provided by others, including student services. Brian felt responsible for housemates whose needs were not being met, including the student struggling with poor mental health who 'eventually left and didn't return' (24). Others criticised the ways in which services seemed clumsy and thinly spread. Ryan suggested that students 'should be able to opt in or out' to inform service providers 'if they want or need them' rather than receiving unsolicited and 'annoying' phone calls (35). Jennifer was equally critical. 'The university mentoring scheme was so hard to access and there was nowhere to find a place for loneliness' (19). Students were also critical of accommodation providers and of authorities and government for COVID regulations that have been particularly hard, fencing them in and isolating them.

Crucially, students have also broken silences about loneliness. Though they did not always speak directly or personally, they did find ways to broach this difficult subject. A year in which many students were going through the same things—relative isolation, experienced by many as loneliness—brought a longstanding issue into the open. As Ian put it, 'Everyone is in the same situation and there is no point being embarrassed' (34). That said, some people do still feel embarrassed and still struggle to speak directly about this stigmatised subject. So it can be necessary to read between the lines—noting silences as well as words spoken—and to continue to experiment with creative and co-produced research methods, through which difficult experiences may be shared. Doing so may open doors that have remained closed in this project, giving voice to those who may perhaps have been less resilient, those whose loneliness defeated them, possibly led to addiction and ill health, perhaps to personal regression and to the breakdown of relationships, to deeper and more deadening loneliness than we have witnessed through this research.

FIGURE 4 Claire, a research student who lived alone during lockdown, coped by 'learning to use a rather different set of tools' ranging from household gadgets like this screwdriver to counselling services

By talking about this subject and listening when others do, it also becomes possible to differentiate between degrees and forms of loneliness, thus to identify times and places in which interventions are most needed. Listening to students talking about their own loneliness and about what they do to cope with or to address it may also provide insights for those in positions of authority and influence. There are lessons here for a range of practitioners: from student accommodation managers to student services and from health providers to policymakers. One of these lessons: the first step, for those who are trying to understand and mitigate loneliness, is to really listen to and find ways to support those who are most affected, for they will know their own loneliness and have the best ideas for what to do about it.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We cannot directly share the data described in our manuscript for ethical reasons, explained in the paper. However, all the anonymised findings including interview records in handwritten notebooks have been acquired by the Science Museum, London, as part of the Collecting COVID-19 scheme, and may be made available through that scheme for researchers in due course (https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/project/collecting-covid-19/).

ORCID

Richard Phillips https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4630-4555

ENDNOTE

[1] Participants in this study are identified by the pseudonym they chose and/or by numbers shown in Table 1.

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