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# Reconceptualising men's loneliness: An interpretivist interview study of UK-based men

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has been extensively linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes. Often defined as a subjective emotion, the influence of sex and gender has regularly been cited as vital to understanding individuals' experiences. Despite this, little research has explored men's perspectives of loneliness using interpretivist approaches. This study addresses this by exploring how gender influences men's constructions and experiences of loneliness in an interview study with a diverse sample of 20 UK-based men. Theoretical thematic analysis led to the generation of a novel conceptualisation of loneliness comprising four interconnected themes: socially negotiated self-worth (an intersubjectively defined mental state); being positively occupied (a mental state of meaningful focus/action); social connections (vital for consistently achieving these mental states); and capacity to form social connections. A second 'layer' in the findings describes how cultural norms of masculinity impacted loneliness defined in this way. Notions of invulnerability and social comparison could render it more difficult for men to form intimate and supportive connections or seek help for loneliness. However, as they were normative, they could also promote self-worth, and facilitate social connections, despite these negative effects. Similarly, masculine roles, in particular family roles, represented a normative framework for preventing loneliness, and could be both beneficial or problematic depending on other aspects of life, identity, or needs. The study offers insight into how men negotiate loneliness within a habitus incorporating multiple and varied gendered norms, values, and structures. Policy and practice interventions could usefully consider and mitigate the risks posed by non-conformity, aim to promote mental states of self-worth and positive occupation, and work to deconstruct masculine norms and values where appropriate.

## 1. Introduction

Loneliness has been widely reported as a significant and growing public health problem (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018a). It has been associated with depression (Schinka et al., 2012), cardio-vascular disorder (Valtorta et al., 2016a), and even death (Shiovitz-Ezra and Ayalon, 2010; Victor and Bowling, 2012). Masculinities have long been argued to frame a male reluctance to seek help for health issues (Courtenay, 2000), and this is particularly widely evidenced in relation to mental health (Yousaf et al., 2015). Loneliness has been identified as a concept influenced by social norms and values of gender (Franklin et al., 2019; Ratcliffe et al., 2021). However, relatively little empirical work has investigated men's subjective perspectives on loneliness.

The predominant paradigm for conceptualising loneliness defines it as a subjective emotion representing a lack, or loss, of meaningful social relationships (Cattan et al., 2005; HM Government, 2018; Perlman and Peplau, 1981). This is framed with 'social isolation' as its counterpoint – where loneliness is subjective, social isolation is an objective state related to the social interaction a person experiences. This loneliness-isolation distinction has also been used to understand different types of loneliness. Most influential is Weiss's (1973) distinction between 'social' loneliness, the absence of an engaging social network, and 'emotional' loneliness, the absence of a close emotional attachment. Valtorta et al. (2016b) go further, constructing an approach in which social relationships are a 'structure' providing 'functions' representing non-loneliness. Functions can be anything from expressions of love to tangible aid such as transportation assistance. The work of John and Stephanie Cacioppo expands this into it an evolutionary

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framework, in which loneliness is experienced when social relationships do not provide the framework for surviving and flourishing as an individual and/or species (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018b).

Utilising a feminist perspective, Wilkinson (2022, p31) argues that this loneliness-isolation distinction presents an overly biomedical approach that fails to account for the 'wider mechanisms that condemn people to lonely lives'. This matters because, when addressing the problem of loneliness, it leads to an implication that 'personal resilience' is more important than social and economic circumstances (Christou and Bloor, 2021). Instead, Wilkinson argues that loneliness exists within a 'continual entwinement' of the self and social and economic structures. In this way, she highlights the role of politics and inequalities.

Franklin et al. (2019) constructed a gendered account of loneliness in which they define non-loneliness as 'belongingness', i.e., the extent to which an individual feels accepted in their communities. As in the above works, loneliness is inherently bound in structures and inequalities, but also in identities and cultures. Men's 'belongingness' is historically constructed via participation in public realms such as workplaces, whereas women act/acted as 'kin-keepers', taking responsibility for family and friendship networks. By placing male and female belongingness as culturally rooted in distinct historicised forms, they show how men and women can have different criteria for loneliness. Their work also begins to resonate with theories of 'hegemonic' masculinities that place some masculinities as a reification of men's cultural dominance (Connell, 2005), given that it displays how cultural expectations for belonging are gendered in ways that reconstruct inequalities.

Notions of hegemonic masculinity have afforded a predominant framework to the majority of research into men and loneliness. Some work has suggested men are reluctant to indicate loneliness, and suggested that an association between loneliness and vulnerability is at the root of this (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2018; Ratcliffe et al., 2021). A reluctance to seek help could also explain why lonely men may turn to alcohol or drug abuse (Hubach et al., 2012; Muñoz -Laboy et al., 2009), or why single men are lonelier than single women (Nowland et al., 2018; Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001), if men are more reliant on female company for intimacy (McKenzie et al., 2018; Nurmi et al., 2018). The hegemony of heterosexual masculinities may also explain why McAndrew and Warne (2010) found gay men sometimes relayed a 'loneliness of outsiderness' related to their sense of exclusion on heteronormative cultural contexts.

'Belonging' implies the potential need to conform to cultural norms and values, therefore Franklin et al.'s (2019) conceptualisation shows how hegemonic masculinities can impact loneliness. However, by emphasising belongingness in a community, it is less effective at conceptualising 'emotional' loneliness - close emotional attachments do not necessarily require a community. Bourdieu's (1968, 2017) concept of 'habitus' can aid in this. 'Habitus' positions individuals as existing within, interacting with, and reproducing, social structures, norms, and values. Loneliness is a subjective emotion, yet it is defined by whether an individual can negotiate the emotional 'functions' or sense of 'belongingness' in the social world they inhabit. In loneliness studies, then, the notion of habitus defines how individual emotion and collective endeavour are inextricably bound. Robertson (2007, p35) defines masculinities as 'precursors to, and products of, intersubjective encounters'. Gendered experiences of loneliness in men can therefore be said to arise where there is a mismatch between the 'precursor' masculinity and the individual - in other words, where an individual cannot attain non-loneliness in the gendered habitus they inhabit.

It is from this perspective of an individual man within a wider social and economic world that the current study positions itself. Our aim was to investigate men's constructions of loneliness, operating from an interpretivist perspective informed by the above debates. Interpretivism is research that aims to 'interpret the meanings and actions of actors according to their own subjective frame of reference' (Williams, 2000, p210). Despite its inherent subjectivity, little work on loneliness has drawn on this epistemological perspective. As a result, men's perspectives on why they appear to conform to seemingly harmful masculine norms and values is not clear, nor is it clear how they construct or manage their experiences when they do not conform. Our goal was to address this evidential gap in an interpretivist study, ontologically placing loneliness as an emotion negotiated in and via intersubjective encounters, in which masculine norms and values may be implicit yet dominant. The research question was:

What is the influence of gender on men's constructions of loneliness, and/or their constructions of their experiences of loneliness?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study population & sample

The study population were men aged 18+ years, with no upper age limit, from the general UK population. A maximum variation purposive sampling strategy (Guest et al., 2013) was employed to recruit a diverse sample of men, reflecting the disparate patterns of masculinities that stem from intersections between gender and other social determinants of health (Evans et al., 2011). This involved sampling a minimum of three non-white men, three sexual and gender minority (SGM) men, three men with a university education, three without a university education, three 18–30 years old, and three aged 60+. The total sample size was informed by a 'pragmatic' approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Participants were recruited via gatekeepers in seven study sites in the north of England: an LGBT community group; a sports centre; a community centre (consisting mainly of British-Pakistani attendees); a men's support and activity group; a group promoting good health in black people; and two umbrella organisations supporting voluntary and community work. Gatekeepers provided a leaflet to prospective participants or invited the lead researcher to join an online meeting to promote the study. Participants were given an information sheet (in addition to the leaflet), offered a £10 gift voucher for taking part, and required to sign a consent form. The final sample size consisted of 20

**Table 1**
Demographic information of interview participants.

| Demographic | N = 20 |
|---|---|
| Age | |
| *18–30* | **5** |
| *31–45* | **5** |
| *46–60* | **7** |
| *61+* | **3** |
| **Ethnicity** | |
| *White-British* | **14** |
| *South-Asian* | **4** |
| *White Eastern-European* | **1** |
| *White-African* | **1** |
| **Sexual orientation** | |
| *Heterosexual* | **12** |
| *Bisexual* | **1** |
| *Homosexual* | **7** |
| **Gender orientation** | |
| *Cisgender*[a] | **19** |
| *Transgender*[b] | **1** |
| **Attended higher education** | |
| *Yes, in the UK* | **5** |
| *Yes, in another country* | **2** |
| *Current student* | **3** |
| *No* | **10** |
| **Living situation** | |
| *Solo-living and never married* | **6** |
| *Solo-living and divorced/separated* | **2** |
| *Widowed* | **0** |
| *With spouse/partner (with children)* | **5** |
| *With spouse/partner (no children)* | **2** |
| *With parents/guardians* | **4** |
| *With housemates* | **1** |

[a] Current sex the same as what they were assigned at birth.
[b] Current sex differs from what they were assigned at birth.

men aged 20–71 years, from a variety of backgrounds (see Table 1 for demographic details). Ethics approval was granted by < redacted for peer review>.

### *2.2. Data collection*

Individual semi-structured interviews were employed to collect in-depth data on men's emotions and subjective perspectives (Plummer, 2001). Interviews were conducted via telephone or online video conferencing software (Zoom or Google meet) by a cisgender white male, of working class origins, aged in his 30s. Video calls were recorded and auto-transcribed, and telephone calls recorded and manually transcribed verbatim, and uploaded to NVivo 12 (2020). Interviews took place between January and March 2021, during severe Covid-19 restrictions. Each interview was loosely split into two sequential parts: a mostly unstructured interview influenced by Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2008) technique of 'free association'; followed by more structured questions based on what literature has previously identified as potentially relevant to men and loneliness. The free-association technique allowed men to frame loneliness more freely, facilitating inductive data that may not have been previously identified in the literature. It places individuals as a 'defended-subject', who may relay incoherent narratives that represent a construction of the self. This is useful for investigating the influence of 'hegemonic' masculinities, which may be implicit in the narrative (Ratcliffe et al., 2021). The structured questioning then used existing knowledge to reflect on the 'freely associated' narratives, and facilitate data that can be contrasted with extant research and theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interview guide, and a shortened version of it that was used in the actual interviews, are in supplementary file 1.

### *2.3. Analysis*

Data were analysed following the principles of theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This focuses on producing text-based themes, centred on a specific topic or topics, developed in conjunction with existing theory and data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is effective for identifying 'latent' (tacit) themes (Boyatzis, 1998) as it allows the analysis to iteratively consider theoretical propositions as a route to interpreting data which may otherwise remain hidden. Mason's (2002) 'literal', 'interpretive' and 'reflexive' readings were incorporated to promote rigour and reflexivity. The literal reading focused on data that directly answered the research question, the interpretive reading focused on 'latent' themes identifiable via theoretical reasoning, and the 'reflexive' reading centred on returning to the men's manifest narratives to examine whether the interpretations in the interpretive reading were fair and accurate.

Mason (2002) argues that research is a co-construction of data, in which, ultimately, the researcher has the power to present the findings according to their own interpretive framework. The theoretical thematic analysis employed in the current study acknowledged this, and attempted to incorporate theoretical perspectives and wider social trends into this process. Though the 'free-association' technique aimed to allow the men to discuss loneliness in a relatively unstructured way, the data were still epistemologically perceived by the authors as 'co-produced' (Mason, 2002) - it was only that this technique aimed to reduce the input of the researcher.

A combination of open coding and *a priori* codes were used to form the themes. *A priori* codes reflected the extant literature (see introduction), and were used to aid the theoretical thematic analysis by providing a specific link to existing theory. They were not automatically used as final themes. 'In vivo' coding was used to arrange the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Three additional tasks were undertaken to aid rigour and reflexivity. Supplementary file 2 presents a consideration of 'deviant cases' (Mays and Pope, 1995). This aims to consider and represent the plurality within the data. Supplementary file 3 displays a form of 'decision trail' listing and discussing the themes after each 'reading' (Long and Johnson, 2000). Supplementary file 4 gives a first-person reflexive account of conducting the interviews.

## 3. Findings

Analysis culminated in the formation of two 'layers' of themes (see Fig. 1). The inner layer (layer one) represents a core conceptualisation of why loneliness was felt by men, and comprised four interconnected themes: socially negotiated self-worth; being positively occupied (doing something understood as positive that holds one's attention); social connections; and capacity to form connections. 'Socially negotiated self-worth' and 'being positively occupied' represented mental states that were not lonely. 'Social connections' were a vital influence on men's likeliness of positively negotiating these emotional states, and 'capacity to form connections' emphasises that men's chances of building connections were not equal and unchanging. Low self-worth, and/or a lack of positive occupation, could reduce men's capacity to form connections, therefore these themes could form cyclical processes (see Fig. 1). Nevertheless, they were not deterministic cycles of cause and effect, but processes that could be interrupted, slowed, turned, and restarted (Murphy et al., 1998).

The outer layer (layer two) represents constructions of masculinities that could interrupt, slow, turn, and restart the processes in layer one. Three themes were constructed: invulnerability; social comparison; and masculine roles. Invulnerability impacted layer one as stating loneliness can undermine socially negotiated self-worth if it is viewed as not masculine, and/or lower capacity to form connections if it is not accepted/respected by others. Displaying vulnerability may also be important for forming connections, but may hinder the formation of connections if viewed as innapropriate by others. Social comparison could impact layer through competitiveness and/or bullying. Competitiveness could be a barrier to forming connections, and raise or reduce self-worth depending on 'success'. Bullying was a powerful barrier to forming connections and negotiating self-worth.

Masculine roles represented normative frameworks for forming social connections, in which nuclear family roles were a particularly prevalent discourse. Masculine roles could provide a foundation for forming social connections and opportunities for being positively occupied, but men who did not share masculine interests had greater difficulties in forming connections and finding meaningful activities, and normative expectations of family roles were particularly problematic for some men. Though these three masculinities were identified as impacting loneliness in these data, any construction of masculinity, held by the individual person or other people, could influence the processes in layer one.

### *3.1. Layer 1: A core conceptualisation of loneliness*

This section will present the evidence for the interconnected themes presented as 'layer one'. They were not presented as a conceptual whole by any single man, but rather reflected common ideas and assumptions. Though different men emphasised different aspects of these themes, all were constructed by most or all of the men. This was likely because of the 'core' nature of the conceptualisation – it is difficult to imagine a person suggesting that they do NOT want to feel self-worth, or be positively occupied. This is further discussed in the consideration of deviant cases in supplementary file 2.

#### *3.1.1. Socially negotiated self-worth*

This represented a parallel concept to 'loneliness', where 'self-worth' was its inverse. It is described as 'socially negotiated' as it denotes the individual man's perception of his role in the social world – whether he feels 'worthy'. It was latently constructed through feelings of being accepted, respected, cared about, or having a 'purpose'. In the following excerpt about his alcoholism, Alisdair demonstrates how not feeling

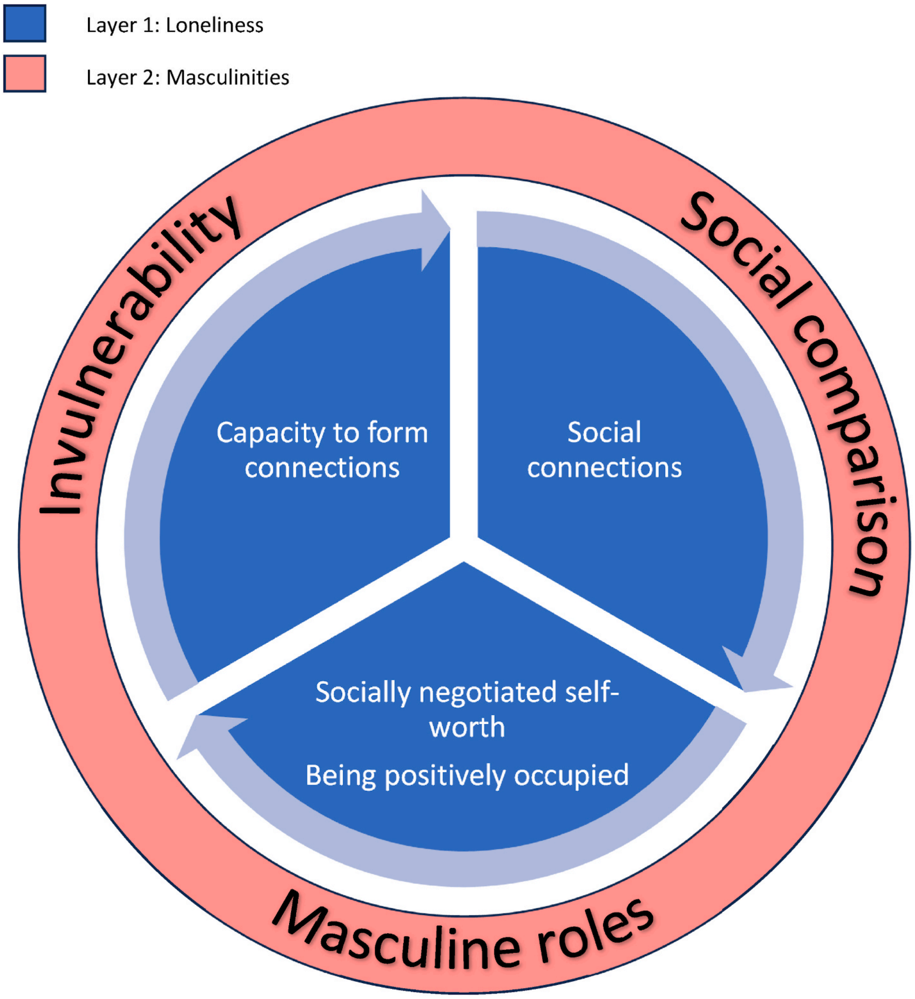

**Fig. 1.** A visual representation of how loneliness was constructed (layer 1) and the impact of masculinities on loneliness (layer 2).

accepted or cared about constituted loneliness:

> Alisdair: You didn't think people actually wanted to be in your company. You kind of tell yourself they invite you to things because they feel they have to, rather than they want you to be there. And it's just like the whole negative thing, it just builds up, just no self-confidence or self-esteem whatsoever. And obviously the more you isolate, the more that perpetuates.

By emphasising how isolation 'perpetuates' low self-worth, he also shows how this could form a cyclical process. He later relayed that giving up alcohol and developing a better relationship with his brother interrupted this lonely cycle.

The importance of 'purpose' and 'respect' to loneliness were identifiable via Harry's representations of when he worked in a kitchen. Producing good quality food was important to him, but his colleagues did not share his enthusiasm:

> Harry: some people don't understand that, and I think that that made me feel lonely that, because I was, someone used to call me, 'oh he thinks he's Gordon Ramsey'.

The mocking way he was described was, he believed, symptomatic of a lack of respect he was afforded for his efforts, at least from his colleagues. In turn, he did not respect them either, leading to a disconnect he constructed as lonely. Nevertheless, he could not simply abandon his 'purpose' of creating good food, as this afforded him self-worth that was socially negotiated insofar as the food was created for, and enjoyed by, other people.

### 3.1.2. *Being positively occupied*

As with 'socially negotiated self-worth', this theme represented a mental state. It consisted of two dimensions: mentally stimulated/focused; and interests/activities. Being positively mentally stimulated/focused represented a mental state where what the individual was doing was their focus. This is best encapsulated by the frequency of the word 'busy', or related terms such as 'occupied', which were employed by 19/20 interviewees to represent the idea that 'busy' is not 'lonely'. Narratives blurring the distinction between mental stimulation and loneliness further emphasise this:

> Adam (discussing Covid-19 restrictions): It's difficult to discern, am I lonely? Or am I kind of devoid of activity, occupation?

> Faisal: It's that noise … if I look, TV off now, it'll be like there's something wrong … I can hear a pin drop. And when you hear a pin drop, there's something wrong. At least your mind or your eyes are occupied by looking at something.

'Interests and activities', on the other hand, were two things: a route to this mental state; and/or a method of facilitating social connections. Liam summarises both in one short sentence where he explains why he values his friends:

> Liam: Just doing stuff together and enjoying the same things.

'Doing stuff' places the activity as mentally stimulating. However, he also emphasises this as social, insofar as the stuff is done 'together', and enjoyed by all present. This implies that it acts as a bridge for building connections with those who also enjoy the activity. Indeed, social interaction itself could be the activity - as Martin put it, meeting people is a 'social drug', as it elicits a positive emotional response.

#### 3.1.3. *Social connections*

Where 'socially negotiated self-worth' and 'being positively occupied' were emotional states, social connections represented an inherently physical dimension – a person or group with who they felt connected. Different kinds of connections were viewed as helpful. Intimate connections, particularly with spouses, were most frequently lauded. The loss of an intimate connection through bereavement was also relayed as a challenge to loneliness by three participants who had lost their mother. Reliable social interactions were also seen as useful, even when they did not represent an 'intimate' connection:

> Scott: I found it hard when I first stopped working. Because you have that contact with people that may not be your close friends, you know a lot about, but you have that general chitchat when you're at work.

As Scott says, these relationships were not 'close', but still provided positive stimulation. Indeed, connections did not even always need specific individuals, but could be, as Brian termed it, feeling 'part of something'. Football fandom, political activism, hobbies, and demographic identities were all constructed in this way. The key unifying feature of these different kinds of connections was only that they could aid the social negotiation of self-worth and/or provide opportunities for positive occupation.

#### 3.1.4. *Capacity to form connections*

This denotes how capable a man is of building social connections. It consisted of two dimensions: ability; and opportunity. Ability refers to social skills and/or their likeliness of attending social arenas. This usually centred on anxieties, such as in Alisdair's narrative above, where low self-worth led to isolation, perpetuating low self-worth. Opportunity, on the other hand, represents an individual's social position. This usually referred to physical spaces or characteristics, such as workplaces, families, ethnicity, or sexuality. Harry discussed both his ability and opportunity to form connections in relation to social class and crime:

> Harry: it's a little bit rougher and it's a bad estate, sort of thing. It can be anyway, quite a lot of crime round here. So it's quite difficult to trust people.

Crime affected Harry's confidence in social interactions, hindering his ability to connect with others. The origins of this anxiety, though, were structural, thus also represent opportunity. The prejudices of others could also impact on men's opportunities to form and maintain connections. Gary, who identified as a trans man, relayed an example in which he lost a friend of over 10 years after they made a transphobic 'joke'. Faisal, an Asian man, described how he had previously lived in an area that was a 'focal point for racism', leading to him and his family moving house. However, Gary and Faisal also described how it could be easier to connect with men who share their identity. Identity, then, could be a barrier, but also a bridge.

### 3.2. *Layer 2: the influence of maleness and masculinities on loneliness*

This section shows how normative constructions of masculinity as invulnerability and social comparison, and how broader notions of normative masculine roles, could impact loneliness. Though the men had varied backgrounds and identities, these masculine themes were commonly recognised. Rather than constructing notably different masculinities, the men tended to engage with similar notions of masculinity from different standpoints. Indeed, even when they did recognise personal and cultural masculinities that varied from these themes, they were still constructed as archetypal and thus were relevant *because* they recognised them. In this way, they could impact loneliness because they were perceived as normative, and impact the processes in layer one regardless of their personal perspectives. Agency, then, was generally constructed as a response to these masculinities. The 'consideration of deviant cases' in supplementary file 2 further discusses where and how the men were similar and different.

#### 3.2.1. *Invulnerability*

This was relevant in two forms of narratives: that men are reluctant to disclose loneliness; and that it is more difficult for men to form intimate connections. The former was constructed using a variety of justifications and language. For Jim, non-disclosure of loneliness was a matter of 'pride', thus bestowed a masculine self-worth, yet also fuelled his past problems with alcoholism and allowed loneliness to fester. Faisal believed people might 'exploit' him if he disclosed loneliness, or that they might think he had 'gone mad'. Hassan constructed it as a masculine responsibility to be 'strong' for his wife and children. In all of these accounts, though, a notion of invulnerability framed the narrative - Jim was proud of his invulnerability, Faisal was concerned about the consequences of being perceived as vulnerable, and Hassan implied vulnerability reneged on his responsibilities to his family.

This invulnerability could also hinder men's capacity to form connections by limiting openness and intimacy. Neil, a gay man, put it like so:

> Neil: When I look at a lot of my straight male friends, and their friendships, they seem to be a lot more superficial, a lot more kind of on the surface with it, with the things that they would talk about.

Neil's quote implies he perceives the issue to exist primarily within heterosexual male-to-male interactions. Nevertheless, he suggested he too had once attempted to 'fit in' in this way, but that he 'failed miserably'. Some men noted that a male presentation as invulnerable could facilitate a reliance on women. Jonny noted that he has 'been able to open up more with women than as many men', and Harold cited this idea to describe the relationship his father had with his mother as 'suffocating'. Notably, several men emphasised this as not rational or deliberate, but as inherited, particularly through fathers. As Alisdair put it, it is 'just not something you grow up with'. Masculine ideals of invulnerability, then, were an implicit influence rendering it more difficult to form intimate relationships, particularly with heterosexual men.

#### 3.2.2. *Social comparison*

This arose via notions of competitiveness, success, and bullying. Harry lamented competitiveness in the workplace as a barrier to forming social connections, and openly linked it to masculinity, yet lauded personal achievement as a facilitator of self-worth. One comment from Nicolas appeared to show how being unsuccessful could have serious consequences for friendships:

> Nicolas: I've realised, a friend that I've had for years, I can't stand him! I can't understand why I was friends with him, he's done nothing with his life!

Nicolas struggled to respect his friend, who he implies to be lazy and lacking ambition, to the extent it constituted a barrier to their continued friendship. William relayed numerous accounts of bullying, ostracisation, and prejudice related to his sexuality, less 'masculine' personality, and accent. This resulted in long-term problems of low self-worth, and intertwined difficulties forming social connections – as he termed it, he struggles to 'trust' people. This can be viewed as 'social comparison' as, for the bullies, and in William's experiences of ostracisaton and prejudice, he was not the correct type of man.

#### 3.2.3. *Masculine roles*

Masculinities were sometimes situated as social norms that could aid or impede the formation of social connections. Brian, when discussing former male colleagues at work, emphasised the potential to connect via interest in sport:

> Brian: one guy, he had played rugby in the past, and one guy who was cyclist and exercise, so when they left, so then you've got that sort of thing going. And I don't know if it's just a coincidence, but again there's not any females colleagues that I work with that are active, sporty, and things like that. So you lose that shared thing.

Talking about rugby and cycling enabled Brian to be more positively occupied, and build social connections. It did not specifically require men, yet the association with men and masculinities were clear to him. In a different interview, Nicolas stated he did not like sport, and suggested this led to difficulties making friends. The same masculinities, then, can be a help or a hindrance to different men.

The most widely identified masculine role was a family role. Some of the men were happily married, yet others relayed that the assumed importance of family roles had been deeply problematic:

> Les: I thought that was the way that you had to be, and I kind of played that game and fulfilled that role really well. Wife, family, car, house, job, blah blah blah blah blah blah. Why do you not feel fulfilled? Why do you still feel there's something not quite right?

After many years, Les realised he was gay, hence his unfulfillment. SGM men were not the only people to present difficulties negotiating this role. For Jim, family roles were so associated with non-loneliness that when he was married, he felt nobody would believe he was lonely, and he believed this fuelled his alcoholism at that time. Cultural and ethnic heritage could also influence perceptions of male family roles. Saed relayed that the traditional male role for him was within a wider family unit, and marriage represented a coming together of families rather than individuals. He was not unhappy with this, yet he noted it is markedly different to White-British family traditions.

Nevertheless, though masculinities were not constructed identically by all the men, most participants constructed them as social norms beyond their control, and as a reality to be engaged with. Forming social connections, taking part in activities, and feeling a sense of worth, then, were impacted by both their perceptions of masculinities, and their perceptions of what *other people* believed masculine norms were. As Les shows above, it was difficult to simply ignore the 'game', or one's 'role' in it, as preventing and alleviating loneliness inherently required engagement with the social world.

## 4. Discussion

This article provides a novel conceptual framework of loneliness in UK men. Notably, it was not solely a subjective lack, or loss, of meaningful social relationships (Cattan et al., 2005; Maes et al., 2019; Perlman and Peplau, 1981). If it was, factors such as keeping 'busy', or committing to a 'purpose', could not be so central to the men's narratives. Rather, the current study situates men's core constructions of loneliness within a broader framework of gender (masculine) norms that influence whether and how men form social connections and maintain a non-lonely mental state. Though seemingly a fairly radical diversion from many current conceptualisations of loneliness, a subjective lack or loss of meaningful social relationships may still conceptualise some experiences of loneliness. Nevertheless, it cannot encapsulate all, nor situations in which the solution to loneliness does not involve improving social relationships or reducing expectations of social relationships.

Habitus (Bourdieu, 1968, 2017) is a useful concept for understanding how 'self-worth' was placed as 'socially negotiated' by participants in the current study as it conceptualises how the arbiter of self-worth was bound by interactions with structures, norms, and values. In turn, the desire for less loneliness can provide a motivation to reproduce existing structures and norms, given that rejecting normative signifiers of worth may lead to a loss of feeling accepted or respected. Furthermore, 'capacity to form connections' parallels what Bourdieu (1973) terms 'cultural capital'. 'Cultural capital' is the mechanism by which inequalities are reproduced, as it allows some people to negotiate the habitus more resourcefully. In the context of these findings, this denotes inequalities in men's chances of not feeling lonely.

Christou and Bloor (2021) and Wilkinson (2022) similarly place an emphasis on structures, norms, and values for conceptualising gendered experiences of loneliness. Unlike these works, though, the emphasis on 'mental states' in the current study suggests support for Cacioppo et al.'s (2014) call for a 'neurology of loneliness'. However, rather than representing a solely biomedical approach, it is an approach that emphasises the neurological as negotiated within the habitus. Lizardo (2004, p376) argues that theories of habitus regard the individual to be 'a physical, embodied actor, subject to developmental, cognitive and emotive constraints and affected by the very real physical and institutional configurations of the field'. The 'field' is an identifiable arena, such as a family, workplace, profession, or marketplace (Leander, 2010). Piagetian notions of cognitive development are central to the 'habitus', then, as they frame the neurobiological development of the individual within the field (Lizardo, 2004). In the findings in the current study, the neurological (emotions constructed as loneliness) can be seen as inherently intertwined with the sociological (norms and values of masculinity).

This perspective, alongside the findings in 'layer 2', add context to previous research on men and loneliness. A masculine reluctance to recognise, admit, and/or seek help for mental health problems has been commonly identified (Yousaf et al., 2015), and the findings in the current study add to a growing body of literature relating this principle to loneliness (De Jong-Gierveld et al., 2018; Ratcliffe et al., 2021). It also offers useful context to confidential surveys that have found evidence suggesting men are more reluctant to acknowledge loneliness in response to a 'direct' question, i.e., one that uses the word loneliness (Nicolaisen and Thorsen, 2014; Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001; Steed et al., 2007) - a denial of loneliness on a survey may still facilitate a masculine sense of self-worth even if no-one is around to see it.

The findings also provide contextual support for the notion that men are more likely to turn to alcohol (Hubach et al., 2012; Muñoz -Laboy et al., 2009) or rely on partners/spouses (McKenzie et al., 2018; Nurmi et al., 2018). A masculine injunction of invulnerability was openly constructed by some participants as relevant to their experiences of alcoholism, and as facilitating a greater reliance on female companionship. However, the ideation of family roles noted in the current study offers an additional context to quantitative data finding a stronger link between partner status and loneliness in men that in women (Nowland et al., 2018; Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001). Rather than solely representing a 'reliance' on spouses/partners for intimacy, it was sometimes constructed as a cultural signifier of what loneliness is, therefore this statistical trend may also represent a masculine discourse in which being in a relationship can be defined as the inverse of loneliness. This did not mean that the individual man could not suffer from low self-worth or a lack of positive occupation related to their social relationships, only that there appeared to be a strong semiotic link between non-loneliness and having a partner/spouse.

The findings of this study are consistent with Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinities. The men interviewed tended to refer to notions of masculinity that were beyond their control, invisibly passed on during childhood, and which often needed resisting and reforming. They were not constructed ubiquitously identically, and were engaged with from vastly different standpoints, yet consistent themes of 'invulnerability' and 'social comparison' implied dominance in the way Connell (2005) describes. Moreover, the 'family' roles that were often perceived as normative social relationships are consistent with her description of hegemonic masculinities as rooted in historical and structural inequalities reifying the dominance of heterosexual men in nuclear family spheres. In terms of loneliness, masculinities are a vital component of the cultures, norms, and values in which men negotiate their worth, take part in activities, and form social connections. Failing to adhere to dominant masculine ideals can therefore constitute a serious risk to loneliness, even if adhering to them is problematic and harmful.

## 5. Strengths and limitations

A large proportion of the study participants were actively involved in community projects. This may have influenced the importance of themes such as 'purpose' and 'being positively occupied', although these themes were similarly identifiable in participants who were not as involved in such projects. Conducting the interviews during Covid-19 restrictions presented a unique context that may limit transferability, but may also have afforded the men insight by giving them prior cause to reflect on isolation and loneliness. The importance of 'activities' and 'positive occupation' to loneliness may have been more identifiable because of the loss of these during pandemic restrictions. It was posited that loneliness is a mental state, but qualitative research of this kind was not designed to investigate neurological mechanisms. From these data, it is difficult to identify whether the findings represent an interpretation of loneliness as a mental state, or whether neurology is genuinely central to the men's experiences. More research, including a 'neurology of loneliness' (Cacioppo et al., 2014), is required to investigate this.

Some features of layer one resonated with research on men and masculinities. For instance, in Brannon's (1976) four 'injunctions of manhood', being a 'big wheel' is said to consist of being 'respected', a notion that was a key to understanding 'socially negotiated self-worth'. The notion of 'purpose', also key to understanding 'socially negotiated self-worth', resonates with research on interventions for ameliorating loneliness have found that 'task-focused' or 'constructive' activities are more effective in men (Anstiss et al., 2018; Collins, 2018). In Willis and Vickery (2022), they also found men commonly referred to being 'busy', yet interpret this as a distraction from loneliness rooted in masculine notions of self-reliance. However, just because the interviews were with men, does not mean their conceptualisations are gender-specific (Emslie et al., 2004). Moreover, it is difficult to see 'self-worth' and 'positive occupation' as concepts that are irrelevant to women. Further research on where and how 'layer one' is/is not gendered will further the study of loneliness.

Future research could usefully examine whether and how the findings of this study are applicable to different groups of men in varying contexts. The current study aimed to focus on maleness and loneliness, and used its diverse sample to produce an account that conceptualises how intersections of identity can further impact men's perspectives on loneliness. For layer two, the model inherently states that different ideals of masculinity, or perceptions of what other people view as masculine, impact how less loneliness can be attained. Furthermore, if layer one is a masculine-specific construction of loneliness, then this may also be impacted by varied cultural perspectives on masculinity. For instance, in a group of older men, the masculine roles they identify, and values around which self-worth are negotiated, are likely to intersect with the embodied realities and cultural norms and values of older people.

It was argued that the men's focus on concepts such as being 'busy', or having 'purpose', meant defining loneliness as a perceived lack/loss of social relationships was untenable. It could be argued, though, that these were incoherent narratives, related to other aspects of mental health. Some interviewees even stated that 'connections' were the primary arbiter of loneliness, not 'self-worth' or 'being positively occupied'. Conversely, if 'socially-negotiated self-worth' and 'being positively occupied' represent the core experiences of loneliness, it could be argued that 'social connections' and 'capacity to form connections' do not belong in 'layer one' - like masculinities, they were able to impact mental states, without being a universal and deterministic cause of loneliness. However, in semiotic terms, 'loneliness' inherently signifies something both individual and social, and this distinction was vital to interpreting the data. 'Social connections' and 'capacity to form connections' are therefore required to conceptualise the social, and 'socially negotiated self-worth' and 'being positively occupied' are required to conceptualise the individual.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings from this study of 20 UK-based men offer a novel conceptualisation of loneliness that places it as mental states of positive occupation and/or self-worth. It is negotiated principally, but not wholly, via social connections. Masculine roles and gender norms, in particular family roles, and cultural notions of invulnerability and social comparison, impacted whether and how non-loneliness is achieved. Non-conformity to dominant masculine norms may aid in the prevention and alleviation of loneliness, such as where men displayed vulnerability, or lived openly as gay. However, non-conformity can also constitute a risk to men's social connections, ability to socially negotiate self-worth, and opportunities for being positively occupied. Policy and practice interventions may usefully focus on ways to reduce these risks. Secondary and tertiary prevention strategies can incorporate a consideration of self-worth and the importance of positive occupation in their design. Primary prevention strategies aimed at facilitating self-worth and positive occupation, as well as deconstructing harmful masculine norms and values, may be difficult to design, but, based on the findings in this study, are vital.

John Ratcliffe - Conceptualisation (lead), Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology (lead), Project Administration, Resources, Software, visualisation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. Mona Kanaan - Supervision, validation, Writing – Review & Editing. Paul Galdas - Conceptualisation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116129.

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