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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Organised loneliness and its discontents

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Abstract

This review paper offers a critique of the discourse of loneliness both in the popular and academic imagination. It questions the stance and approach of much loneliness research and the headlines that have been extracted from it. These position loneliness as an epidemic, framing it as a global public health problem, its aetiology and management located in the individual. The paper draws attention to overlooked alternative framings of loneliness as well as to the risks of maintaining our current levels of alarm regarding it. Finally, the work of Hannah Arendt is turned to, as part of a wider academic reappreciation of her work on loneliness. The paper ends by suggesting what can be learned by loneliness researchers in the medical humanities from such political analyses.

KEYWORDS

Arendt, discourse, loneliness, wellbeing

INTRODUCTION: LONELINESS—A PANDEMIC?

Loneliness is a compelling topic capturing something that hovers just beneath the surface in contemporary culture and the popular imagination. It attracts academic curiosity, raising questions about human strife that bestride health, mental well-being and social structure. Loneliness is also of interest to academia because it rapidly became established as a topic apparently researchable through validated measures; applicable to a wide range of stakeholder interests and amenable to interdisciplinary investigation.

Labelled a pandemic (Killeen, 1998), referred by the Economist in 2018 as 'The Leprosy of the 21st Century' and described in *The Lancet* as a public health problem (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018), loneliness began to seize headlines at least 20 years ago and has hovered there ever since. It is now largely unchallenged as an international public health issue (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015) with health policy and interventions being developed at pace (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). In 2023 in the United States, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy took the unusual step of laying out a framework to tackle loneliness and address its risk to the social fabric of the country, after synthesising the research (Murthy, 2020), so passionate was he about the threat of loneliness to American society. Social isolation and loneliness are recognised as a priority public health policy issue for older people by the World Health Organisation (World Health Organization, 2021) and a systematic review of 2022 found evidence of problematic levels of loneliness being experinced by a substantial proportion of peole in many countries (Surkalim et al., 2022). Meanwhile, a billion-dollar loneliness industry has arisen to provide antiloneliness products to those who do not know what to do about their loneliness (Rosenzweig, 2020).

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These messages, however, are proliferating with some significant oversights. The fact that loneliness is an almost inevitable outcome of a planet on which there are around eight billion highly mobile, uprooted and transient individuals being one. Second, the absence of swathes of the global community from research studies and the limited consideration of how particular groups in specific contexts may experience and narrate their loneliness is problematic. The limitations of WEIRD psychology (Henrich et al., 2010), in which conceptualisation psychology as a science has continued to focus mainly on the Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic demographic are important to note, with findings being far less than representative of the wider diversity of humanity.

A further issue is that across both research and policy, loneliness, a socially constructed phenomenon (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015), is frequently conflated with isolation, with some problematic interchangeable usage (Valtorta, Kanaan, Gilbody, & Hanratty, 2016). Systematic reviews have now begun to problematise, separate and define these terms (Grillich et al., 2023; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Hoppmann et al., 2021; Veazie et al., 2019) and small moves towards a clearer conceptualisation are emerging (McHugh Power et al., 2018). Loneliness, routinely portrayed negatively and as experienced in parallel with other distressing emotions, a state not opted for (unlike solitude), is also distinct from 'aloneness'—a more neutral state as clarified by Buchholz and Catton (1999).

While many scholars argue that loneliness is ubiquitous among humans in one form or another (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), this itself should lead to questions about the alarm it appears to be raising now. Are we as a species actually lonelier or are we less able to manage feelings of loneliness? is there something about contemporary life that makes us more vulnerable to loneliness—and how are we going to recognise and address the plight of people prone to loneliness as a result of being excluded, overlooked, ostracised and discriminated against, if loneliness is claimed as universal?

RESEARCH INTO LONELINESS: THE MESSAGES

Loneliness research tells us that the experience suggests at core a dysphoric condition, resulting at least in part, from discrepancy thinking—that is, an incongruity between one's ideal and real social relationships (Cacioppo et al., 2015). Some studies are now investigating how 24/7 social media affords people increased opportunity to make such social comparisons (Steers et al., 2014) and suggest the 'social pain' of interaction and comparison may also increase feelings of loneliness.

The case for its evolutionary value, which proposes that the need to belong likely promoted the survival of the human species by granting evolutionary advantages on our ancestors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is further made through the Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL) (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). This suggests it is the discomfort of being alone that motivates us to seek companionship, benefiting the species by encouraging group cooperation and protection. A corollary consideration then, is what residual evolutionary impulses remain that urge us to form groups, ideally with an optimal cognitive limit of 150 (Dunbar, 2016) and feel a lack, should we as individuals not achieve this—and whether such residual impulses serve us.

Loneliness has long been argued to be associated with poorer mental and physical health (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017) with studies exploring its correlations to illnesses such as cancer (Mosher et al., 2012); heart disease (Valtorta, Kanaan, Gilbody, Ronzi, & Hanratty, 2016) and high blood pressure (Hawkley et al., 2010). It is also implicated in engagement with unhealthy behaviours (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Nieminen et al., 2013). Loneliness has also been a factor in psychological and physical conditions which are less obvious; chronic loneliness, is, for example, said to decrease physical activity leading, in its wake, to increased risk of frailty (Hoogendijk et al., 2020). It is finally, according to Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015), a predictor of early death.

A body of studies looks solely at the impact of loneliness on mental health, with loneliness widely demonstrated to have adverse impacts on this (VanderWeele et al., 2011). Conditions such as depression appear to be particularly vulnerable to its impact (Erzen & Çikrikci, 2018) and it is correlated with anxiety, especially among adolescents (Danneel et al., 2020). Significantly for these studies, neuroscientific research has also recently identified a region of the brain believed to generate feelings of loneliness known as the dorsal raphe nucleus, or D.R.N., best known for its link to depression (Matthews et al., 2016).

There is exponential growth in exploring the relationship between loneliness and aging and cognitive decline (inter alia, Lara et al., 2019). Over a lifespan, it is common for individuals to report feelings of loneliness or alienation, with studies suggesting the vulnerability to this, of young adults, the aged, and marginalised groups (e.g., people with disabilities, ethnic/cultural minorities, the LGBTQ population) in many countries (DiJulio et al., 2018; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Rokach, 2019). A subsection of loneliness study is devoted to exploring

the stigma attached to it (Barreto et al., 2022; Kerr & Stanley, 2021; Lindgren et al., 2014) and what has become the taboo of loneliness (Killeen, 1998). What is lacking as yet is an insight into how the discourse of loneliness and its ubiquitousness as a concern may be playing a part in fuelling taboo and stigma by locating aetiological power in the traits and failings of the individual.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the study of loneliness increased dramatically, with states such as sudden-onset loneliness being described. It is unsurprising that many studies undertaken during the pandemic suggest a further correlation between loneliness and psychiatric disorders but they also helpfully threw into relief the underlying social inequalities that worsened the psychological and physical impacts of the pandemic (Li & Wang, 2020; McQuaid et al., 2021). Sudden-onset isolation and loneliness as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic have had noted impacts on both physical and mental well-being (Huremović, 2019; Hwang et al., 2020) and the relationship between worry and anxiety and loneliness during COVID-19 is also documented (Varga et al., 2021). Less explored or emphasised, however, was the emergence of testimony about unexpected *benefits* of more aloneness. These include an increased connection with nature (Roll et al., 2021), in some types of creativity (Mercier et al., 2021) and research is still forthcoming regarding the positive outcomes (Radka et al., 2022) of lockdown, although it remains challenging to extrapolate what, in these studies, could be hypothesised as related to factors during the pandemic other than the state of being alone.

It would seem, then, that the evidence of loneliness being detrimental to health, correlated with ill-health and being more harmful to, and prevalent among vulnerable members of society is irrefutable. That said, the very claimed prevalence of loneliness as well as its claimed dramatic rise should provide reason for us to pause and enquire.

RESEARCH INTO LONELINESS: SOME LIMITATIONS

Recognition of the limitations of loneliness research is growing. Karnick (2004, p. 11) found the experience 'not adequately addressed' in the existent literature in healthcare fields, pointing to the tendency to regard loneliness as a 'social deficit problem' discussed in a reductionistic way, frequently reproducing unwarranted stereotypes. As noted by Victor (2021, p. 51) despite its complexity, 'empirically loneliness is presented as an unproblematic concept that is universally understood and experienced homogeneously'.

Far from being experienced homogeneously, loneliness can have a particular intensity, poignancy and debilitating effect on those already marginalised or excluded from mainstream society and its cultures. The cyclical nature of exclusion and loneliness among discriminated groups and the interface of minority stress and loneliness (Elmer et al., 2022) remain relatively underexplored. In a recent paper (Isibor & Sagan, 2023) the loneliness and shame of concealment due to living with a visible difference, for example, is explored; while Vidal and colleagues in (2023) demonstrated the particular experience of loneliness as a result of repeated rupture in the refugee experience.

The metrics of loneliness are being questioned with researchers calling for the field to rethink them and 'to account for diverse intraindividual experiences and trajectories of loneliness' (Akhter-Khan & Au, 2020, p. 1; Hymas et al., 2022). It is a further concern that definitions and measures of loneliness may inhibit the revelation of the cultural context and heterogeneity (Van Staden & Coetzee, 2010) with reservations being cast regarding cultural and linguistic clumsiness. But there are other concerns too.

Social contagion

The idea of social contagion suggests that individuals adopt the attitudes or behaviours of others in the social network with whom they communicate, a 'three degrees of influence' rule of social network contagion (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Social network contagion has been demonstrated for an emotion similarly as nebulous as loneliness, happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008) as well as in relation to health conditions such as obesity (Christakis & Fowler, 2007) and health behaviours such as smoking (Christakis & Fowler, 2008). Applied to loneliness, the indication is that when a person engages in behaviours and emotions related to their loneliness the signals they send can spread via this process to those around the potentially lonely individual, who then are more likely to mirror emotions and behaviours, which in turn can engender loneliness. While this factor has been explored by some researchers with regard to loneliness (inter alia, Cacioppo et al., 2009), it remains under-identified as a confounding phenomenon when claims are made about who is or is not lonely. Similarly, the role of the self-fulfilling prophecy is underexplored, with some studies suggesting that stereotypes of age stage and expectations of loneliness play a role in determining future loneliness, among, for example, the older

population (Pikhartova et al., 2015). Importantly, in their review of the clinical significance of loneliness Heinrich and Gullone (2006) have alerted us to the importance of research which addresses how beliefs and expectations influence and affect behaviour, and vice versa.

The social contagion factor along with our vulnerability to expectations about ourselves formed by cultural messaging both have a role to play in descriptions of how identity and self are formed. If, as Harari (2015) insists, we are a narrative species, with our beliefs, expectations and by extension, our behaviours, thoughts and emotions being based on and formed through the stories we believe and reproduce, be these about religion, political movements, or loneliness epidemics, then the possibility of the contagion of loneliness gains further hold. The power of narrative, and how the stories we hold on to about who and *how* we are become enscripted into us, courtesy of our brain's plasticity, is now of interest to neuroscience (Berns, 2022) and its messages and speculations are salutary.

With the loneliness literature mounting almost daily with findings about the loneliness of students (inter alia, Vasileiou et al., 2019) adolescents (Twenge et al., 2021) and other groups particularly vulnerable to discourses and the proliferation of messaging on social media regarding the condition of loneliness, the risk is considerable of us adding to the problem with the 'epidemic' becoming its own 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1991).

Individualisation and medicalisation of loneliness

The multiplication of the experience of loneliness through headlining is one concern. However, there is a further concern regarding *how* that experience is being framed, how it takes its very shape as a regime of truth. Loneliness discourse in popular and academic literature invariably both individualise and medicalise it (McLennan & Ulijaszek, 2018) often positioning loneliness as something shameful and potentially pathological (Wilkinson, 2022), framing it as a public health issue rather than a socioeconomic problem (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Relatively few studies explore the intersectional impact that poverty has on loneliness and poor health and the increased risk factors due to socioeconomics (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). Loneliness is rarely exposed as an issue exacerbated or even caused by particular policies in housing, welfare and education, policies that effectively isolate, separate, discriminate and stigmatise people. Perceived overcrowding, for example, has been shown to drive feelings of disconnectedness (Rugel et al., 2019) as has an absence of contact with the natural environment (Hammoud et al., 2021).

Bereft of community, family, and social structures such as libraries, green spaces, community centres and swimming pools, populations are then 'targeted' by interventions against loneliness offering suggestions that are both trite and ableist (Magnet & Orr, 2022). These routinely prescribe behaviours that many in these populations may have already exhibited before the local bus service, for example, was reduced to one bus a week; or before the community centre closed its doors. Further, it could be argued that medicalising what should be positioned as a social problem and associating it, de facto, with health problems located in the individual, is itself detrimental to people's well-being through potential iatrogenic effects and by removing a sense of personal and communal autonomy over people's health (Illich, 1975).

By locating loneliness in the individual, neoliberal discourse urges self-management through prescribed behaviours, a discourse that appears to empower, but actually employs a moralist undertone to craft the person as both expert and manager of their care. Within such reiterated sentiments of 'responsibilisation' individuals are expected to take moral responsibility to be healthy, productive and sociable—the 'wilful', unengaged (lonely?) individual is steered towards behaviour change (Sagan, 2017a). This process of 'responsibilising' citizens (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017) widely critiqued by campaigners and academics opposed to the commodification of mental health (Esposito & Perez, 2014) also succeeds in 'irresponsibilising' governments and institutions (Cradock, 2007, 162). Paradoxically within the neoliberal context, while our well-being is inextricably linked to the lives of others (Holland, 2022; Murthy, 2020) we are bombarded with both covert and overt messaging that our prosperity is based on competitive self-interest, individualism and consumption.

LONELINESS: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS A RESTORATION OF AGENCY

Both philosophy and literature have traditions stretching back at least to ancient Greece of viewing loneliness in more nuanced, complex and provocative ways. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) wrote about eudaimonia—a state roughly akin to happiness or well-being, generating speculations about just how this might be achieved. These accounts are less based on reductionist ratios of numbers of networks and friends and more on a textured understanding of and enquiry into what

meaningful life consists of, and how this is achieved with regards to an other or others. Justice cannot begin to be done to this canon here, but readers are pointed to Ben Lazare Mijuskovic, (2005, 2012, 2018) whose assertion that we are all, a priori, 'necessarily, universally, and innately lonely' (Mijuskovic, 2005, p. 23) is explored in detail through a psychological, philosophical and literary lens.

Twentieth-century philosophers have held a steady preoccupation with the subject of loneliness. Merleau-Ponty (1995) and Heidegger (1996) both viewed it as an ontological *necessity* arising in the moment of confrontation with our mortality; a very human challenge to which we as human beings need to muster the strength to confront, yet also make creative sense of. Phenomenologists, including Sartre as Existentialist, who famously stated that 'Hell is other people' (Sartre, 1975) contributed rich provocations to conceptions of loneliness, claiming at core an iterative being-with-other dynamic in which an understanding of one's self can only be arrived at through an understanding of how one is in relation to others and the world.

This lens, through which the quality of our connection to others is intrinsically linked to our connection to one's self reflects both ancient Buddhist Dharma and contemporary investigations in psychiatry and neuroscience into the use of psychedelics in treating mental illness. In new ground-breaking treatments, it is empathy with and connection to oneself that is said to radiate outwards to the same for others, activating feelings of togetherness which mitigate illness and loneliness (Holland, 2022). It is a lens through which we can also circle back to better grasp the philosophical views on loneliness of later philosophers and phenomenologists. Moustakas, (1972, 1989) usefully distinguished between so-called 'existential loneliness' and 'loneliness anxiety'. The first was viewed as an inevitable part of the human experience in which a sense of one's separateness from others, one's very aloneness, offers a way back to oneself, and hence to a renewed re-entry to human fellowship and community—loneliness as both leaving something behind and coming to something; the latter, a negative experience resulting from a basic alienation between people.

For Erich Fromm (1984) the solution to humanity's loneliness lies in the achievement of 'authenticity' a state in which one faces freedom despite our terror of this. Anthony Storr (1988) believed the experience of loneliness offers up an opportunity for *improved* mental health, self-discovery and creativity; and similarly for Anneli Rufus (2008) being a loner opens doors to imagination and concentration, as well as invention and originality.

Much of this exploration as it moves through philosophy, phenomenological and existential arenas through to psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology reflects a formulation of the self as both intrapersonal and interpersonal and posits a concept of loneliness as grounded in the human capacity for connection and love, as described by Roger Frie (2012). The literature, in fact, in which loneliness is viewed through a more hopeful, powerful and creative lens is considerable (Gibson, 2000) and demonstrates that the contours of loneliness and our understandings of its landscapes shift through time and place (Alberti, 2019; Vincent, 2020), and indicate we have arrived at a particularly bleak view of the state of being alone.

Psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory have long contributed to exploring loneliness. Indeed, along with longing, loneliness constitutes 'core components' of the key constructs in psychoanalysis (Willock, 2013, p. 265). Much of the canon is, understandably, less interested in causal or correlational relationships between loneliness and ill-health but it does fully recognise the existential pain and psychological distress of its experience. A seminal paper by Reichmann (1959) first drew our attention to the terror of loneliness and how far one may go to avoid it. Object-Relations theory points to the formation of functional holding introjects as prerequisite for managing loneliness, usefully suggesting that when a 'real' object is not present, one must learn to make do with an internal *felt* presence. The achievement of this particular capacity is unattainable for some people, most notably, according to, among others, Adler and Buie (1979), individuals diagnosed with the contested diagnosis of Personality Disorder, in which an intolerance of aloneness is a core feature. Their work has been seminal in our developing understanding of the particular loneliness of personality disorders (Liebke, et al., 2017).

In 1991, Peter Fonagy began to draw on understandings of the deficits in mentalization to explore this intolerance of aloneness, and there are valuable examples of how both these formulations have been taken forward in research in the area (Fonagy, 1991; Vardy et al., 2019). Fonagy's later work on psychotherapeutic mentalisation practice and research (Fonagy, 2022) foregrounded the important role of epistemic trust in combatting loneliness, demonstrating that with improved mentalizing individuals become more accurate in identifying their personal narrative, alterations in which could reap significant benefit. For Fonagy, feelings of loneliness are linked to a lack of epistemic trust—necessary to open our minds to fresh understandings. Carl Jung, years before him in 1963 may well have foreknown the importance of this epistemic trust when he held that loneliness, rather than stemming from having few people

around one, arose from 'being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself' (Jung, 1963, p. 356). We will return to this apparently throw-away line, suggestive of the importance of being seen and heard in the following section. These are rich formulations and conceptual means by which researchers and medical professionals should be exploring the lived experience of loneliness and the ways in which early years experiences, epistemic injustice and compounded socioeconomic factors all work to weave a complex web of vulnerability to aloneness and an inability to confront it.

Psychoanalytic thinkers have also stressed the importance of the loneliness experience for development, and researchers have begun to ask why it is that almost entirely overlooked in our contemporary formulations of loneliness is a framing of it that explores its possible benefits (Long & Averill 2003). For Winnicott, famously and importantly, the 'capacity to be alone' (1958) is nothing less than key to creative living and Melanie Klein's poignant theories on the roots of loneliness also suggest a creative side of loneliness (Milton, 2018); again, recognising the inherent propensity of the human being to feeling profoundly alone, but also addressing how that human being, ever resourceful, ever creative, can, given the bare essentials of life, face, address and marshal the experience in the service of profound growth. An anthology of contemporary psychoanalytic papers on loneliness (Richards et al., 2013) offers a series of essays which further demonstrate the complexity of loneliness and its relationship with early trauma, usefully uncoupling it from the dominant construction of loneliness as a result of insufficient or inadequate friends and social connections.

These examples of alternative readings of loneliness leave room to do a number of things. First, to view it as a part of the messy human condition, an experience which may well be sending signals from deep in our evolutionary hard wiring to get out more and smile at our neighbours. But not only. The sense of loneliness may also point to the need for a life more examined; a change, perhaps, and a more frank but compassionate internal dialogue; the integral part of the Buddhist practice of nurturing the capacity to be a compassionate friend to yourself (Sarvananda, 2012). Hand in hand with this relationship with the self, these alternative views also point to the creativity, the restfulness (Dahlberg, 2007) and the 'taking stock' accessible only, perhaps, through introspection and being alone. Crucially, such views restore some agency and potential to the person, allowing us to be less a victim of a loneliness pandemic, and more a human being grappling with the human problem of being.

The experience of loneliness is, in sum, complex (Yanguas et al., 2018), with large gaps remaining 'in our understanding of loneliness, rates and drivers of loneliness in different populations, its effect on health and wellbeing, and evidence on effective interventions' (Fried et al., 2020, p. 114).

LONELINESS: THE POLITICS

The word loneliness, derived from 'oneliness', only picked up currency post-1800 as industrialisation began its journey of dispersing populations, capitalism fragmenting them, and consumerism isolating them, leaving people famously, to bowl alone (Putnam, 2000). In postdeveloped society more individuals also began to live alone; age alone and die alone (Nelson-Becker & Victor, 2020). Yet prominent messages about the preponderance of loneliness in this sociocultural context mask a view of being alone as one of the costs of us having *more choice*. The experience of liberal democracy, now in crisis (Vormann & Lammert, 2019), holds an inherent paradox as 'loneliness is both a fulfilment and a disruption of its possibility' (Dumm, 2010, p. 31).

The rise of privacy, itself a product of market capitalism, is a driver of loneliness. Although living in a rural location has been indicated as a risk factor for social isolation and loneliness (Henning-Smith et al., 2018; NHS Highland, 2016) the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a drift already well underway; that of affluent urbanites to rural areas, who cited a desire for space and privacy. The preponderance of dormitory towns; gated communities and high security, cocooned executive dwellings all point to a felt need for privacy and chosen dislocation—and to the choice of the privileged to sequester and insulate.

There is also more choice than ever about where and with whom we live. But also more choice about whether to remain in unhealthy relationships or not; whether to live in overcrowded settings or not, whether to uproot and move in search of a better life; the trend of rising single-person households appears to extend across all world regions (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). While far from evenly distributed, there is also more choice over our employment patterns, although the rise of digital nomadicy as a fast-increasing employment choice has loneliness as a demonstrable challenge among its population (Nash et al., 2018). The so called 'gig economy' with its precarity but vaunted flexibility has been shown to foster 'uber alienation' and loneliness (Glavin et al., 2021). Some 'choices' in postdeveloped societies are double-edged swords—a move away from 'real' communities to online communities, for example, may lead to the formation of

friendships, but social media users also describe the experiences of weakening friendships, online ostracism, and heightened loneliness (Ryan et al., 2017).

Many of the de-traditionalisation (Gillies, 2003) gains made in the 20th century, perhaps most notably for women (Snell, 2016), did come at a price. Critical evaluations of the family which describe it as a 'stultifying and essentially oppressive institution' were to be welcomed as enabling more egalitarian alternatives to the family to develop (Gillies, 2003, p. 7) and a heightened sense of loneliness as new identities, relationships and kinship groups are experimented with may be a price many are willing to pay. Choice always comes at a cost, and this dilemma, faced by many who are extricating themselves from oppressive family, cultural, religious or institutional structures is one not helped by the alarmist, deficit discourse of loneliness.

Loneliness, an emotional cluster rather than discrete emotion (Alberti, 2019) comprises a complex, bidirectional weave of experience; cognition; emotion and both mental and physical health, generated by a multifaceted interplay of lived subjectivity in and with the social and material world. And a fear of loneliness, the ubiquitous and simplified discourse of it, and its place in the popular (inter)national consciousness may in fact be contributing to the very growth of the loneliness problem, performing medicalisation through popularisation.

Some research does now indicate further, that in this mix sociodemographic and intersectional factors (Liu, 2020) are at play. The links between social capital and loneliness are relatively underexplored, but some findings suggest that low social capital, especially in terms of low trust, may be a risk factor for loneliness (Fonagy et al., 2021; Nyqvist et al., 2016). While much loneliness research understandably focuses on the individual and/or particular target groups, wider forces in society need to be front and centre of the loneliness debate. Neoliberalism's promotion of competition, for example, is widely claimed to be undermining a sense of solidarity and social security (Piketty, 2015). A 2021 study argues that neoliberalism 'appears be harmful to health because it can create a sense of being disconnected from others, as well as being in competition with them, in ways that feed feelings of loneliness and social isolation' (Becker et al., 2021, p. 962).

Part of a pattern of what Ritzer (2005) referred to as one of hyper-consumption, an increase in materialism has also been associated with loneliness. In a study by Pieters (2013) materialism was associated with an increase in loneliness over time, and loneliness was associated with an increase in materialism over time. Tragically, in this logic, we buy stuff that temporarily gives us a fix and distracts us from our emotional world, but this soon makes us feel even lonelier—so we buy more stuff. In this vein, Becker et al., 2021, p. 961) urge that as researchers tackle loneliness 'we need to be mindful of the fact that its causes can be political as much as social and psychological'.

Indeed one of the most ominous aspects of the rising rates of loneliness is, according to Damon Linker (2021) that therein lies a partial explanation for increased political polarisation with growing numbers of people attracted to more radical forms of political dissent on both the right and the left, suggesting that if loneliness and isolation become worse, so could our political pathologies. In 2023, Hilary Clinton wrote in her article 'The Weaponization of Loneliness' of the echo chambers where the vulnerability of the lonely is preyed upon and polarisation undercuts community ethos (Clinton, 2023). These are new echoes of old worries; in 1893 Émile Durkheim coined the word anomie to describe the social alienation and lack of social cohesion and solidarity that can accompany rapid social change (Durkheim, 1893).

These warnings, stark in commentary journalism, yet observably under—pursued through research make the 2016 murder of MP Jo Cox in the UK even more tragic. During her time as an MP, Cox formed an independent, cross-party Commission of MPs and charities to highlight the need to help lonely people in our community. It is a terrible irony that she died at the hands of a supporter of white supremacism and exclusive nationalism. This kind of new populist, polarised, 'non-thinking' was precisely what political philosopher Hannah Arendt warned was a consequence of citizens becoming isolated and vulnerable to political pathologies in her book, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1973). Her work is now enjoying a renewed readership as populist movements continue to gain traction across Western liberal democracies and political scientists draw parallels between the political crises of the previous century and those which many countries are witnessing today. This revisiting is part of a groundswell return to political theorists such as Marx, whose concept of alienation is being reconsidered as part of a search to understand 21st century powerlessness and loneliness (inter alia, Øversveen, 2021) and to which we loneliness researchers would do well to pay more attention.

But it is Arendt (1973) whose perspective on loneliness first gave us a crucial link to understanding the danger of loneliness as part of regimen control and placed loneliness firmly in the political sphere. Her positing of the implications of 'loss of world' is relevant too—by this she points to the profound alienation experienced through losing a protective place of one's own from which one can be shielded from a 'naked exposure to the exigencies of life' (Arendt, 1958, pp. 254–5). Her deep take on loneliness

argues that there is now a state of organised loneliness, encouraged by government in order to increase the docility of citizens through the impoverishment of the world held in common. In cutting people off from human connection and a sense of a shared 'world' the lonely are impotent, unable to realise a full capacity for action. Loneliness, in Arendt's argument, also means that people lose contact with their thinking selves; terror and panic replacing solitary thought.

An important development of Arendt's work is offered by Lucas (2019). Lucas introduces the concept of ontological agency, positing loneliness, as Arendt defines it, as the conceptual opposite of agency. A buzzword and concern of the social sciences for the past two decades or so, 'agency' has multiple definitions and interpretations, but the term is a useful placeholder to refer in some way to the capacity and freedom of individuals to make choices and act on these in ways that make a difference in their lives (Martin et al., 2003). Agency is hotly contested as a concept in part because it immediately draws into discussion questions about equality; access; rights and responsibility—not to mention personality type and free will. At core, two questions remain vibrantly alive: who has agency and how does one get it. For Arendt, one means is by acting together—when people act in concert and create a common world, they develop a common language and understanding (Arendt, 1973). This enables them to make claims about their human and political rights. In this construction, people gain agency through the power of recognition and recognition chains (Lamont, 2023); through seeing and being seen, for Lucas (2019) reading Arendt, appearance in the world is a form of agency and loneliness is the failure to appear as a self in the world. If we step back from the ontological challenges posed by Arendt and extended by Lucas—it is clear why observations of the multiple malaises of neoliberal democracies including lack of trust; disaffection with political processes; binary, populist positions; individualism and alienation among apolitical, atomised masses can steer a view of loneliness as an outcome of, at least in part, a vacuum in a sense of agency.

This is a lack partly attributable to not feeling seen, to experiencing, in an Arendtian sense, a loss of world (Arendt, 1958). For Lucas, the capacity to appear as a unique self in the world is intersubjectively constructed in and through relationships with others. Risking simplifying this, let's state for the purposes of this paper, the experience of being seen and 'recognised' as part of a shared 'something' ushers in a sense of collectivity and agency. We now have some means by which to understand rates of apparent increased loneliness in postdeveloped societies. An important link will also have been forged to work in the medical humanities, for example, that by Fonagy et al. (2015). In this, he points to the importance of *epistemic trust*—by which an individual or group of individuals can trust social sources of new knowledge in counteracting loneliness.

LONELINESS: FROM POLITICAL ANALYSES TO THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES

As a researcher in the area of loneliness, my research has been far from immune to the tricks and traps of pervasive thinking about loneliness. Research support I have obtained has been gained at least in part due to the topical nature of my enquiry and the benign, widespread interest in helping lonely people. I have explored the experience of loneliness brought to me by clients (Sagan, 2022) among people with enduring mental illness (Sagan, 2017b); loneliness in learning (Sagan, 2008); the lonely experience of Borderline Personality (Sagan, 2017a) and loneliness in the art making process (Sagan, 2022). Through a narrative phenomenological approach which attended to how meaning was made by people in their narrative accounts, some interesting developments were revealed in the ways in which loneliness was experienced and managed *over time*. There were, for example, strategies at which people independently arrived to help manage their loneliness. Narrative accounts have also indicated the power of alternative framings of 'the problem' and mapped the cessation of feelings of loneliness, independently of interventions—either personal, medical or social. Participants I have spoken with have alluded to the role of aging and gaining of insight; of the power of positive self-narration; of good talking therapy; of the outdoors and awe of nature. Some of the findings reveal an impetus participants have mustered to make different choices in their lives, and these chime with the work on loneliness of psychoanalytic and humanistic psychology. Some resonate with positive psychology, which, while rightly criticised for its individualistic bias that can easily reinforce core tenets of neoliberal ideology (inter alia, Binkley, 2011) does, however, make a strong case for us highlighting, or at least ceasing to overlook, human strengths.

Two common factors emerge across these studies. First, as human beings, we need to be seen and therefore in some way felt to be validated (Sagan & Sochos, 2016). This was an aspect of the experience of loneliness among refugee and migrant communities where the trauma of multiple rupture was contributing to renewed loneliness (Vidal et al., 2023). Rupture, accompanied by social or

interpersonal 'absence', as described by Roberts and Krueger (2021) can be a potent mix for deep loneliness, weakening the anchor points in our life through which we may accrue feelings of value and validation. In their paper of 2010 (p. 10), Hawkley and Cacioppo remind us that:

Humans are such meaning-making creatures that we perceive social relationships where no objectifiable relationship exists (e.g., between author and reader, between an individual and God) or where no reciprocity is possible (e.g., in parasocial relationships with television characters).

While agreeing that a striving for connection is part of the human condition, I would underscore, in our research and practice, the crucial role of reciprocity—the being seen, heard and validated. Second, that loneliness is 'compounded' (Sagan, 2020). As with any experience of emotional distress, repetition can calcify it, engraining itself into our self-narrative and thereafter constructing our very sense of self. Such compounding of loneliness occurs through repeated deficiencies of response, beginning with childhood experiences of not being seen and adequately responded to, leading to distrust, confusion and a lack of epistemic confidence. Classic studies are now further supported by neuroscientific discovery (Nagy et al., 2010) testifying to the vital role of reciprocity in interpersonal interaction. Further compounding occurs through trauma, injustice, and ostracism. Being overlooked and underseen through society's many and deft processes of exclusion and discrimination may continue through the deep cuts of epistemic injustice; poverty and dearth of opportunity, all experiences which erode trust and disintegrate agency, which brings us back to Arendt and to Lucas, and the powerful argument that absence of agency is the condition of loneliness.

CONCLUSION

Many professionals across the medical sphere will be confronting the symptoms of the 'silent epidemic' (Wood, 2013) of loneliness and its corollaries in our day-to-day work. In this paper, I have not sought to dismiss research into loneliness which may support this work, nor suggest loneliness is not a problem. There is no doubt that loneliness is a hallmark of our internetted times where bots and apps step in for nods to our neighbours and human-to-human time spent. It is also clear that there are medical, social and political ramifications of loneliness. But I *have* urged a decentreing of the individual from conceptualisations of loneliness, which would enable us to investigate how our systems, structures, institutions, transactions and relationships are increasingly configured to limit or proscribe reciprocity and to exclude, discriminate and overlook. Without this sociocultural view, there remain weaknesses in our approach to loneliness research, and this paper has critiqued its claims and maintained the experience and its interface with health, culture, and socioeconomics are far more complex than we sometimes assume. I suggest a social constructivist approach to its understanding offers a granularity to how we apprehend the phenomenon and its causes, symptoms, and alleviation. Such an approach opens rich seams of understanding of how loneliness is experienced personally but constructed in an interplay of lived subjectivity in and with the social and material world.

This paper has also cautioned there are real threats to both health and social structure as a result of an erosion of social connection in society (Haslam et al., 2022) and the political reverberations of such erosion. I have urged us to look more keenly at the possible benefits of loneliness, to desist from adding to the damaging taboo and fear of it, and to explore thinkers who have pointed to different ways of imagining the phenomenon. Finally, I suggest that a sociocultural view does not exclude phenomenological, in-depth and longitudinal exploration, to which we should apply epistemological humility and foreground the 'is-ness' (Finlay, 2014, p. 121) of loneliness in our quest for a deeper understanding of its many discontents.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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