Topoi
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09931-4

Lonely Places and Lonely People

Matthew Ratcliffe[1]

Accepted: 7 May 2023

Abstract
Feeling lonely, being a lonely person, and living through lonely times can all be construed in terms of the emotional experiences of individuals. However, we also speak of lonely places. Sometimes, a place strikes us as lonely even when we do not feel lonely ourselves. On other occasions, finding a place lonely also involves feeling lonely, isolated, and lost. In this paper, I reflect on the phenomenological structure of loneliness by addressing what it is to experience a place as lonely. I suggest that approaching loneliness in this way can help us to see how it involves not merely the lack or absence of something but, more specifically, the sense of *being unable to* access social and personal possibilities that may still appear accessible to others.

Keywords Emotion · Lack · Loneliness · Phenomenology · Possibility

1 Introduction

Loneliness is often attributed to an individual, who is said to feel lonely, be lonely, or be a lonely person. However, we also talk of lonely situations, times, and places. Descriptions of a singular experience of loneliness sometimes move interchangeably between one's own feelings, the kind of person one is, the situation or place one is in, and/or certain times in one's life. On occasion, we might also say that *it* is lonely, in a way that encompasses but does not differentiate between how one feels, how one relates to the surrounding world, and how one's surroundings appear.[1] Thus, in addressing the experience of loneliness—what it consists of, what renders it distinctive, and how much diversity it accommodates—a number of different starting points are available to us. These may prove informative in different ways, serving to illuminate some aspects of loneliness more so than others. Here, I will focus principally on what it is to experience a *place* as lonely, as a way of approaching the more general phenomenological structure of loneliness.[2] As I will show, an emphasis on lonely places can help us to appreciate how loneliness involves a distinctive way of experiencing and relating to our surroundings, something that is not so apparent when we begin by asking what it is for a person to feel lonely or be lonely.

Regardless of whether we are concerned with lonely people, times, situations, or places, a common theme in the literature on loneliness is that something specifically interpersonal or social appears *lacking*, in a way that either constitutes or elicits a form of emotional distress. However, this does not get us very far. There are many different kinds of interpersonal and social experiences, interactions, and relations, not all of which are equally implicated in the causation, alleviation, and experience of loneliness (Seemann 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, deprivation of social opportunities can be accompanied by a range of other emotional experiences, including anger, jealousy, boredom, guilt, sadness, relief, and contentment. So, describing loneliness as an emotional response to deprivation of interpersonal or social

✉ Matthew Ratcliffe
matthew.ratcliffe@york.ac.uk

[1] Department of Philosophy, University of York, York, UK

[1] See also Motta and Larkin (2023, p. 613) for the view that loneliness has various different "experiential dimensions".

[2] In referring to a "place", I am thinking of a specific geographical location that is experienced as lonely, such as a town, a ruin, a wilderness, a workplace, or a country. This is to be distinguished from talk of "being in a lonely place" that refers to how things are with a person, where "they're in a lonely place right now" is comparable to "they're in a dark place"—all is not well, but in a way that need not relate to any particular location. Even so, I would not want to deny that there are interesting similarities and overlaps between the two.

Published online: 30 May 2023

contact does not suffice to distinguish it. Talk of "lack" also requires refinement. For instance, how could the same kind of lack be attributable both to a place and to oneself?

In order clarify what is lacking in loneliness and what renders it phenomenologically distinctive, I will consider what it is to experience a place as lonely, and how such experiences relate to one's feeling or being lonely. My approach will draw upon a distinction drawn some years ago by Robert Weiss (1973, pp. 2–3), who suggests that experiences of loneliness can be divided into two broad kinds: the "loneliness of emotional isolation" and the "loneliness of social isolation". When we experience a place as lonely, social isolation is often the more prominent theme—that place is lacking in social opportunities. Hence, "I love my partner, but we live in such a lonely place" sounds more natural than "I live in a lonely place, where I have a great social life". However, I will suggest that Weiss's distinction requires revision. Instead of construing social and emotional/personal loneliness as different but overlapping emotional syndromes, I will propose that we conceive of loneliness in terms of their interdependence. One or the other may be more phenomenologically conspicuous in a given instance, but it is together that they constitute a sense of *being unable to* access certain kinds of interpersonal and social possibilities. And it is this that distinguishes loneliness.

I do not seek to account for *all* of those predicaments that might be termed "loneliness". For instance, Mijuskovic (2015) regards loneliness as an irrevocable feature of the human condition, attributable to our unbridgeable distinctness from one another.[3] I am instead concerned with a contingent predicament that we experience to varying degrees—sometimes we are very lonely; sometimes we feel slightly lonely; and sometimes we are not lonely at all. It is arguable that this still spans a range of different phenomena and that a pluralistic approach to loneliness is required (Seemann 2022).[4] Nevertheless, my account accommodates considerable diversity. It does so by regarding the "social" and "emotional" as inextricable aspects of loneliness that vary in their relative salience, as opposed to distinct syndromes. In addition, I allow that loneliness is common to a range of otherwise different emotional experiences, but without implying that loneliness is *itself* phenomenologically heterogeneous. Faced with the variety of loneliness, one might conclude that it is not a single emotion or mood but instead a bundle of emotional experiences, its constituents varying from one instance to the next. That would indeed lead to a pluralistic approach. However, having granted that loneliness is an essentially *emotional* experience, an alternative position remains available: loneliness consists in a distinctive phenomenological structure that is common to a variety of emotional experiences. We could thus speak of a lonely guilt, fear, grief, sadness, or boredom (Ratcliffe, in press).[5] Similarly, certain emotional adjectives can be placed before "loneliness", as with a fearful or guilty loneliness. I will argue that these experiences incorporate a common structure: a sense of being cut off from certain interpersonal and social *possibilities* that may remain conspicuously accessible to others, in virtue of one's lacking something else. Hence, loneliness is not a simple matter of experiencing the absence or lack of q; it involves experiencing the inaccessibility of q as originating in a lack of p, where p relates more specifically to oneself. Certain possibilities still appear integral to one's surroundings; they are not just gone. But they appear *as* unavailable—one is excluded, cut off, or estranged from something. I will explicate this structure by reflecting on what it is to experience a place as lonely and to feel lonely in such a place.[6]

2 Lonely Places

What is it for a place to be lonely? In approaching this question, we might seek to identify certain physical properties of places that elicit feelings of loneliness. Alternatively, we could attend to the relevant phenomenology—what it is for a place to *appear* lonely. My concern is with the latter. Indeed, I am doubtful that any particular properties are characteristic of lonely places in general, given that such places can be so different from one another, ranging from deserted glaciers to overcrowded airports.[7] Then again, one might object that the aim of identifying what it is for a place to *appear* lonely is similarly questionable. Perhaps referring to a place as lonely serves merely to indicate that it *disposes* people towards loneliness. So, there is no additional experience of its looking lonely. Although I think an appeal to dispositions is plausible here, I will suggest that these are indeed *experienced,* in the guise of possibilities with which a place

[3] In contrast, Bound Alberti (2019) regards loneliness as a historically contingent form of emotional experience, something that came into being as a "recognizable experience" in the 1800s.

[4] See Motta (2021) for a helpful review of different conceptions of loneliness.

[5] Consistent with this, Moustakas (1972, p. 50) refers to the loneliness of disappointed or rejected love and of guilt.

[6] Phenomenological characterization of loneliness also has the potential to inform our responses to others' loneliness. As Motta (2021, p. 75) observes, "neglecting an in-depth study of the subjective experience of loneliness leads to interventions whose only goal is to increase social interactions". What is needed is a more nuanced account of what is lacking.

[7] However, we might be able to identify and distinguish certain *types* of features that can contribute to the loneliness of a place, such as the absence of other people, norms that stifle certain kinds of interpersonal interaction, lack of social spaces or social opportunities, how that place embodies prejudicial discrimination, and so forth.

is imbued. That is what remarks such as "this place looks so lonely" are often concerned with. I will show how, by attending to these possibilities, we can gain wider-ranging insights into the nature of loneliness, which consists in experiencing this same configuration of possibilities as one's own possibilities.

Just as a place can be lonely, it can be boring, exciting, happy, or frightening. Perhaps, then, the experience of a lonely place has the same structure as a host of other emotional experiences, all of which involve a subject, an object, and a relationship between the two. For example, we feel fear, an object of fear appears threatening, and we are afraid of that object (which could be a place or some feature of it). It is tempting to think of a lonely place in similar terms, as the object of someone's loneliness. However, talk of lonely places is not suggestive of a straightforward intentional emotion—an experience directed *at* something in particular. One is not lonely *of* or lonely *about* a place. The utterances "I am lonely" and "it is lonely here" usually refer to a predicament that we are *already in* when having more specifically directed emotional experiences such as being afraid of something. Loneliness thus involves a wide-ranging or even all-enveloping way of encountering and relating to our surroundings, which operates as a backdrop for emotional experiences with more or less specific contents.

We might instead think of loneliness as a mood, where moods are taken to have very general objects and also to endure for longer periods than episodic emotions. However, loneliness does not fit that characterization either, and nor do lonely places. Granted, we sometimes talk of lonely moods, but these are highly variable. For instance, guilt, boredom, or anxiety may predominate. Furthermore, experiencing a place as lonely need not involve being in a lonely mood at all. Even when one does *feel* lonely in that place, one's loneliness can be situational, and also experienced as such. There is an appreciation of how to get out of it; it is annexed to that situation or that place rather than being something that clings to oneself.[8]

For these reasons, I take it that loneliness is neither a mood nor an emotion. It is more plausibly construed as a structural feature of one's emotional experience as a whole—an integrated way of experiencing oneself, one's situation, and one's relationship to that situation. This is why it does not lend itself to talk of being lonely *of* or *about* something that we encounter within an already established situation; the loneliness is already integral to one's situation. Given this, the relevant phenomenology can be approached from different directions, which include how one's surroundings—and sometimes a particular place—appear.

In attending to lonely places, it is also important to acknowledge that a lonely-looking place need not be a place where we ourselves *feel* lonely. Indeed, we can be struck immediately by how lonely a place or scene appears without feeling in the least bit lonely ourselves. Instead, whatever we refer to as "lonely" is experienced as an enduring property of our surroundings, dissociable from our own current emotional experience. As with a beautiful or spiritual place, we can recognize the relevant qualities to some extent without being affected by them ourselves. So, the loneliness of a place is sometimes better construed as a *situational atmosphere* that we recognize, than as something that we ourselves feel. Nevertheless, encountering the loneliness of a place does at least involve acknowledging that loneliness *would be* an understandable or even appropriate response to that place in certain circumstances. In this respect at least, a lonely place is comparable to a place that we take to be boring or frightening. The comparison is limited, given that different norms are applicable to emotional responses of different kinds. For instance, in encountering a *foul* or *vile* place, it can be added that we *ought* to respond in a certain way, with disapproval, revulsion, or—where the evaluation has a moral aspect—condemnation. Lonely places are not always associated with such normative expectations. Even so, loneliness in a lonely place is sometimes *understandable* to such an extent that we would question the appropriateness of alternative emotional reactions, such as enthusiastic engagement and unwavering approval.

But when is loneliness an understandable or appropriate response to a lonely place? The relationship between the two can be construed in terms of a distinction between spectator and participant perspectives. In looking upon a lonely place from outside, one need not feel lonely. However, this is consistent with the recognition that, if one were to *depend* upon that place in a certain way, one's predicament would be a lonely one. The place appears to us as *lacking*; it fails to offer something to actual or conceivable others. What, though, is lacking from a lonely place? To answer that question, we can start by acknowledging that such a place fails to offer certain distinctive kinds of *possibilities*. How human experience incorporates a sense of the possible is a consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition, from Husserl's writings to the present.[9] To accommodate

[8] Hence, loneliness is not to be identified with what I have elsewhere called "existential feeling" (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015). An existential feeling is an all-enveloping way of *finding oneself in the world*, which constrains the kinds of significant possibilities to which one is receptive and—with this—the scope of one's emotional experience. However, loneliness is often experienced as specific to a contingent situation; there remain possibilities outside of one's loneliness. Nevertheless, I will accept that loneliness *can* be integral to existential feeling—a limit on the possibilities offered by the world, rather than something that is experienced within the context of an already established phenomenological world.

[9] For example, we find an emphasis on the experience of possibility and, more specifically, anticipation in Husserl (1948/1973, 2001), who maintains that the overall structure of experience depends upon pre-reflective, bodily anticipation, which ordinarily takes the form

the diversity of emotional experience, what is required is a more specific emphasis on our sensitivity to various kinds of *significant* possibilities and the differences between them. In other words, objects, events, and situations are encountered as *mattering* to us in various ways (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015, 2017). For example, when something *looks* threatening, it offers certain relational possibilities—it might or will harm oneself or others. In addition, more specific types of fear can be distinguished phenomenologically by appealing to differences in the kinds of possibilities involved. A threat can appear to us as major, minor, immediate or distant, responsive or unresponsive to our own agency, and unlikely, likely, or certain to be actualized. Emotional experiences of other types can be similarly analyzed in terms of how their objects appear—the kinds of possibilities that they are imbued with. Furthermore, the surrounding world as a whole can appear exciting, disappointing, alarming, intriguing, and so forth (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015).[10]

We can think of lonely places in these terms—they are experienced *as* lacking in certain significant possibilities. Importantly, the possibilities in question are not encountered simply as "mine". Our pre-reflective experience is also sensitive to distinctions between what is significant and how it is significant "for me", "for you", "for us", and "for them". For example, I do not experience a hard object racing towards my face in the same way as a hard object racing towards the face of someone nearby, while a chair in a café appears as something to sit on regardless of who one might be—it offers that possibility to *us* rather than to me or them. Of particular importance when reflecting upon lonely places is the acknowledgement that emotional experience is also sensitive to more specific distinctions, such as "available (perceptually and/or practically) to me but not to them", "available to them but not to us", "available only to me", and even "available to everyone apart from me". The configuration "available to others but not to me" need not involve a sense of lack or deprivation; it could be a matter of indifference. However, where the relevant possibilities *matter* in certain ways, a sense of their being available to others but not to oneself is also an awareness of lack or absence. More specifically, it involves something appearing *inaccessible* to oneself, in a way that also amounts to one's being excluded, blocked, or estranged from it. In this manner, I suggest, loneliness involves not only the absence or lack of something from experience but also an awareness *of* absence.

When encountering a place as lonely without feeling lonely ourselves, we experience a particular configuration of possibilities. Certain possibilities appear to us as unavailable to actual or potential others who might depend upon that place for something (the nature of which remains to be clarified). In feeling lonely ourselves, we lack access to those same possibilities. By analogy, we might experience falling brickwork as an imminent threat to those actually or potentially walking below it. When we are in that situation ourselves and see the danger we are in, we encounter those same possibilities but relate to them differently; they appear as ours. Both ways of encountering a lonely place involve immediate, pre-reflective ways of experiencing our surroundings. Although explicit reflection may be involved as well, it is not required. This is evident from a wider consideration of how lack, absence, and inaccessibility are experienced. We walk into a room and see straightaway that something is missing from it; we reach out to grab a pen, only to be struck immediately by its absence from a familiar location; we try to open a locked door and *feel i*mpeded, blocked, unable to access something. As such examples indicate, many experiences of possibility take the more specific form of *anticipation*. Indeed, pre-reflective, dynamic patterns of habitual anticipation and their disruption shape all of our experiences, thoughts, and activities.[11] When anticipated events fail to arise, there is often an immediate awareness of unfulfilled expectation. Depending on how an event matters and how our expectations are disrupted, this awareness can take a range of more specific forms, including disappointment, relief, surprise, and bewilderment. Sometimes, it involves a sense of lack or absence.[12]

Footnote 9 (continued)

of unwavering confidence or certainty. The view that experience is infused with anticipation is further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), amongst others, who emphasizes the cohesiveness of patterns of anticipation, their indeterminacy, and their relationships with interpersonal experience.

[10] A position along these lines can be supported by appealing to various different changes in how things *appear*—specific objects or the surrounding world as a whole—that arise in a range of circumstances and are difficult to make sense of in any other way. Things can look somehow radically different, despite there being no observable changes in their physical properties. For instance, an object might appear strangely unfamiliar, distant, filled with significance, or detached from its surroundings. Similarly, the world as a whole can appear wholly bereft of certain kinds of possibilities or imbued with different kinds of possibilities. Perhaps nothing captivates or draws one in as it once did, or everything is infused with an air of menace (Ratcliffe 2015).

[11] Many but not all experiences of possibility are a matter of anticipation. This, it can be added, is often primarily bodily and felt—it is through our active, feeling bodies and our practical engagement with situations that we experience unfolding arrangements of significant possibilities (Ratcliffe 2015, 2017, 2022).

[12] Experiences of lack and absence are not mutually exclusive (although experiences of absence tend to concern entities, whereas lack concerns properties of entities or situations). For instance, a room may appear lacking in some way, which is equally describable as the experience of an absent sofa.

This gives us all that we need in order to analyze experiences of lonely places. A lonely place lacks certain significant possibilities—it fails to offer something that we might anticipate or require from it. A lonely place can be experienced as lonely for them, for me, or for one (where "one" is anyone who might depend on it in a certain way). In a scenario where one also feels lonely, the loneliness is a unitary experience, describable in terms of one's own feelings, one's surroundings, or the relationship between them. A lonely place renders certain possibilities inaccessible and, in feeling lonely, they appear "inaccessible to me". The salience of their inaccessibility is constituted by their remaining available to actual or hypothetical others, who reside in that place or elsewhere. The experience is a contrastive one, thus accounting for why loneliness is so closely associated with experiences of separation, alienation, and difference from others. The utterances "I feel lonely", "I am lonely", "I am lonely here", "it is lonely", and "I am in a lonely place" can all refer to this same experience, emphasizing one or another aspect of it.

3 Social and Emotional Loneliness

We still need to specify *what*, exactly, is experienced as inaccessible when we are lonely, and it is to this task that I now turn. Roberts and Krueger (2021) take loneliness to involve an experienced lack of access to social goods. However, we can be more specific here. I have suggested that certain possibilities appear "accessible to others but not to me". It can be added that, in finding them inaccessible, one also experiences the lack of something else—that by means of which they might be accessed. Hence, the phenomenology of loneliness involves lacking possibilities of type p, where these are a condition for accessing possibilities of type q.[13] What, though, do p and q consist of? Here, we can introduce a modified version of Weiss's (1973) distinction between social and emotional loneliness. Sometimes, the lack of p is primarily a lack of social participation while q is primarily a lack of emotional/personal connection, and sometimes vice versa. Furthermore, the sense of inaccessibility can go both ways: where lack of p is experienced as impeding one's access to q, disruption of q may equally be experienced as lack of access to p. Inaccessibility can originate in and be attributed to a range of circumstances, including various changes in personal relationships and social environments. Sometimes, it is attributed to, and experienced as, a transient or enduring condition of the self.

This requires a rethinking of Weiss's original distinction. According to Weiss, social and emotional loneliness are overlapping syndromes or symptom clusters. What they share in common, and what sets loneliness apart from other forms of emotional experience, is a combination of lack and yearning. The difference between the two is that emotional isolation involves the absence of a close emotional relationship whereas social isolation involves being deprived of an "engaging social network" (Weiss 1973, pp. 18–19). Experiences of loneliness thus have different causes. They also differ phenomenologically, as these causes elicit different combinations of emotions. Whereas emotional loneliness might be described in terms of one's "utter aloneness" or "emptiness", along with a "desolate, barren" world, social loneliness is more a matter of "boredom", "aimlessness", and "marginality" (Weiss 1973, p. 21). Take the contrast between loneliness in a marriage and loneliness in a new and unfamiliar place. One could maintain that emotional isolation is likely to be most prominent in the former case, whereas moving to an unfamiliar place is more likely to involve social isolation.

Although it is informative to distinguish the social and personal/emotional aspects of loneliness, it is also important to acknowledge their interdependence. Being alone in an unfamiliar place can involve lacking access to forms of social interaction that might otherwise have led to experiences of interpersonal connection. Thus, it is not social possibilities per se that are lacking but, more specifically, the *kinds* of social opportunities upon which certain interpersonal possibilities depend. Emotional relationships are not formed and sustained in a vacuum. For the most part, they develop within a larger social context, where one occupies a place among others and where certain forms of social interaction are prescribed and elicited, or at least sanctioned. Conversely, how we interact with the social world depends in various ways on our emotional relationships. Granted, one could be stuck in a lonely marriage and still have a larger social life that is fulfilling in many ways. Nevertheless, to the extent that one remains committed to the marriage, the social world is also bereft of certain possibilities—those that involve obtaining what one currently lacks. In addition, other social possibilities may depend on having what one lacks. Where a partner is not integrated into one's social life, the inaccessibility of possibilities that involve an "us" interacting with a "them" may be a conspicuous feature of social experience. What is lacking in loneliness is thus a synthesis

[13] This complicates an account that I have developed elsewhere, which focuses on forms of loneliness that involve lack of access to shared social activities, where those activities are a prerequisite for feeling connected to other people (Ratcliffe, in press). What I am suggesting here is consistent with that analysis but also broader. I allow that loneliness can equally involve a lack of access to interpersonal relationships that might otherwise open up social activities. In this latter scenario, the sense of being excluded from social participation can be more salient than the lack of interpersonal connection.

of close personal relationships and forms of wider social participation.[14]

There are many different situations where deprivation of social opportunities implies reduced possibilities for interpersonal connection and vice versa. For example, throughout Weiss's 1973 discussion, a prominent theme is the close connection between grief and loneliness. As Weiss recognizes, loss of a long-term relationship due to a bereavement can also amount to a wider-ranging loss of ability to engage with the social world—we always did this together; we used to have dinner with them; they know me as her partner; and so forth. A well-established, intimate relationship can be constitutive of one's access to a larger social world (Ratcliffe 2022). At the same time, lack of social opportunities can be experienced as interfering with the possibility of forming new relationships. So, although the social and the personal vary in salience, one cannot feel social loneliness without at the same time having some degree of privation in one's interpersonal relationships. Similarly, one cannot feel personal loneliness without experiencing one's social life as lacking in certain respects. This is not to suggest that one could not have a perfectly fulfilling social life without a close personal relationship or a fulfilling personal relationship in the absence of a wider social life. The point is that neither experience would amount to one of loneliness. When someone is lonely, both are to some degree lacking.

One way of putting things is to say that there is more to loneliness than not feeling part of a "we" and also more to it than lacking a certain kind of "I-you" relation. It involves both, and in an integrated way. What I have in mind in referring to a "we" does not require any particular commitment regarding the nature of so-called "we-intentionality". It is just a matter of experiencing oneself as a participant in social situations. In addition to possibilities that are encountered as "for me but not to them", "for them but not for me", and "for me and also for them", there are possibilities "for us". Hence, one experiences and engages with a social situation in a way that does not set oneself fully apart from others. Certain possibilities are experienced as available to all concerned, often in virtue of their ability to interact with one another. This then opens up possibilities of other kinds.

Being part of a shared situation, involving expected and prescribed patterns of interaction, can serve as a basis for cultivating relationships with particular individuals, including relationships that involve sustained emotional connection. One cannot experience this sort of connection in its fullness and at the same time feel or be lonely. Conversely, one cannot experience it *as* unobtainable without feeling or being lonely. The *type* of interpersonal experience that is lacking in loneliness can be characterized more specifically in terms of trust and mutual openness. Moustakas (1972, p. 61) describes what I have in mind here: "one cannot know another person ultimately except by being there in the life of the other, listening, perceiving, waiting for significant aspects of the other person to be expressed and unfold". He identifies this with what Martin Buber (e.g., 1958) refers to as an "I-Thou" relation. Amongst other things, it is a way of relating to another person that involves an appreciation of there being certain interpersonally constituted possibilities for change and development: "growth of the self requires meetings between I and Thou, in which each person recognizes the other as he is; each values and contributes to the unfolding of the other without imposing or manipulating" (Moustakas 1972, p. 67).[15] These possibilities are lacking in loneliness.

4 Lonely People in Lonely Places

I have proposed that feeling or being lonely in a lonely place involves being unable to access certain possibilities, upon which other possibilities depend. To make all of this more concrete and also further develop the approach, I will now turn to a specific example—Olivia Laing's autobiographical account of loneliness in her 2016 book *The Lonely City*. Laing had recently moved to New York City in order to be with a partner. However, he then ended the relationship, leaving her alone in an unfamiliar place. Laing's account thus combines the loneliness of a place with the loneliness of a lost relationship, where the latter impedes access to wider social possibilities. From the outset, it is evident that loneliness is not to be identified simply with solitude. Rather, Laing's experience of being in a lonely place involves an awareness of being in close proximity to millions of others and yet somehow isolated:

[14] Enns (2022, pp. 71–73) makes the complementary point that, even when loneliness is focused explicitly upon the salient lack of an emotional relationship, it can be symptomatic of social practices that sanction only certain kinds of relationships, such as being part of a "couple". For single people, the possibility of companionship is sometimes blocked not just by being uncoupled but by an absence of social possibilities that might have fostered interpersonal connection in other situations.

[15] For a detailed analysis of this kind of interpersonal experience, which emphasizes how various ways of relating to other people are integral to a sense of our own possibilities, see Ratcliffe (2015, 2017, 2022; in press). In addressing loneliness, Motta and Larkin (2023) describe, in a complementary way, the kind of interpersonal connection that is lacking, similarly observing how a sense of our own possibilities relates to the presence or absence of interpersonal connection. Without certain ways of relating to others, we are ourselves diminished.

> Imagine standing by a window at night, on the sixth or seventeenth or forty-third floor of a building. The city reveals itself as a set of cells, a hundred thousand windows, some darkened and some flooded with green or white or golden light. Inside, strangers swim to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can't reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure. (Laing 2016, p. 3)

This passage emphasizes the way in which loneliness includes a *conspicuous* lack of access to something. Certain possibilities are experienced as salient but at the same time as unavailable to oneself. Their appearing as such is not attributed exclusively to one's own experience or condition. The loneliness of the place is somehow embodied in its architecture, in a way that is tied to Laing's own experience of loneliness but not limited to it. There is heightened visibility, combined with inaccessibility.

I indicated earlier that experiencing a place as lonely involves its failing to offer certain possibilities to those who depend upon it. This might seem difficult to reconcile with Laing's awareness of being excluded from what others in that place *do* have access to. However, what is needed here is a more discerning account of how possibilities "for me", "for us", and "for them" are experienced. Possibilities that are unavailable to oneself need not appear inaccessible to *everyone* else. Instead, they are experienced as inaccessible to those in a certain kind of situation, perhaps outsiders, newcomers, single people, or those who are vulnerable in the wake of a relationship breakup. This remains compatible with there being a "them" for whom such possibilities remain—those who socialize conspicuously in their apartments, as one looks in from the outside. The predicament is akin to that of watching a train full of happy passengers dining in luxurious carriages, as it passes slowly through the dark, wet, dirty, deserted station where one sits in silence on a cold bench. Hence, the experience is not just one of lack or absence but of estrangement or exclusion from social possibilities.[16] Laing's account also emphasizes a lack of interpersonal connection, closeness, or intimacy:

> It's possible—easy, even—to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others. Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. (2016, pp. 3–4)

Consistent with Weiss's (1973) description of loneliness, the experience of lack is combined with that of yearning, but it is not a matter of emotional loneliness in contrast to social loneliness or vice versa. Instead, Laing's narrative moves between them, in ways that are suggestive of their inextricability. There is a pervasive experience of being *unable* to establish a type of interpersonal connection; it *appears* inaccessible. This inaccessibility is attributable in part to a lack of opportunities for social participation. These opportunities may continue to appear all around—inside the glass boxes where people reside, in bars, in workplaces, in parks, on streets. Yet they present themselves as possibilities "for others" rather than possibilities "for me" or "for us". Integral to the experience is a contrast between an "I" and an anonymous "them". Missing from the place is an undifferentiated sense of what is available "for us". It is in the context of organized social encounters, where some shared structure is already established, that the possibility of more intimate relations arises, whether close friendships or romantic involvements.

Laing does not witness all the lit-up apartment buildings from the perspective of a curious spectator, for whom they might embody a lack of possibilities for certain others. The lack of access is experienced as hers. The city is recognized as a place in which others will also feel lonely. But this does not amount to a sense of our being lonely together, comparable to the way in which we might enjoy a film together. Instead, I am lonely and some of them happen to be lonely too. Central to the experience is a pervasive awareness of being cut off from something important, which presents itself *as* unavailable: "What does it feel like to be lonely? It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast" (Laing 2016, p. 11).[17] This configuration of possibilities can arise in response to a

[16] This aspect of experience is also conveyed by the following passage, where philosopher Diane Enns describes what it was like to be alone in Berlin after a relationship breakup: "My new loneliness reverberated across the empty space between the bed, the table, and the wardrobe. Through windows overlooking a courtyard, I faced seven floors of apartments on the other side and witnessed there the private lives of strangers, uncurtained until nightfall. My view: the happiness of others" (Enns 2022, p. 29).

[17] The experience of being unable to access something that others continue to share can be more pronounced in some situations or at certain times than others: "the bad times came in the evenings, when I went back to my room, sat on the couch and watched the world outside me going on through glass, a light bulb at a time" (Laing 2016, p. 14).

range of otherwise quite different situations.[18] Laing is surrounded by others and yet separate from them. However, the same lack of access to social participation that others, located elsewhere, retain access to could just as well characterize the experience of being stuck in a solitary house on a wet, windy moor.

5 Not Belonging

Experience of loneliness can also be described in terms of not feeling or being *at home* in a place or situation (e.g., Bound Alberti 2019, Ch. 7). It might be the case that (a) the situation fails to offer participatory opportunities through which intimate relations arise and are maintained, and/or (b) one lacks intimate relations that might otherwise enrich a larger social situation.[19] Regardless of how exactly the two interrelate, the consistent theme is a lack of *integration* between them—social situations are cut off from possibilities for interpersonal connection and vice versa. Given that these same possibilities still present themselves as accessible to others, there is a pervasive sense of being detached or excluded from something or somewhere. As Moustakas (1972, p. 45) writes, loneliness "is connected with feeling different from other members of a group or feeling misunderstood and apart from others, with a sense of not belonging".

Hence, loneliness is an understandable response to social environments where one is excluded from various opportunities (due, for instance, to prejudicial discrimination or linguistic differences).[20] However, it need not involve being *actively excluded* by others. Lack of access to participatory opportunities can take a number of more specific forms and involve a variety of emotional experiences. In Laing's case, it involves a pervasive feeling of disorientation:

> I was in the city because I'd fallen in love, headlong and too precipitously, and had tumbled and found myself unexpectedly unhinged. During the false spring of desire, the man and I had cooked up a hare-brained plan in which I would leave England and join him permanently in New York. When he changed his mind, very suddenly, expressing increasingly grave reservations into a series of hotel phones, I found myself adrift, stunned by the swift arrival and even swifter departure of everything I thought I lacked." (Laing 2016, p. 12)

There is no consistent social position from which to interact with others and open up relational possibilities. In this way, finding oneself stuck in a lonely place can involve *not having a place*, being outside of norms, practices, and opportunities that are a prerequisite for various interactions.[21] A closely related theme is that of lacking trust; others in general may appear threatening in ways that inhibit one's openness to interactions that might otherwise nurture and sustain feelings of connection. As Svendsen (2017, p. 68) observes, "lack of trust produces a caution that undermines the immediacy that is so important in our attachment to others". Consistent with this, Laing (2016, p. 19) describes continuing to need and search for a certain kind of interpersonal connection, but at the same time being impeded by feelings of vulnerability and exposure.

Whether or not it takes this specific form, the sense of not belonging to a place can be a matter of *feeling* lonely for a short period or, alternatively, *being* lonely in the longer term. Whether we talk of feeling lonely or of being lonely depends in part on the extent to which a lonely situation or place appears contingent. One might feel lonely in a particular place while knowing full well that one will soon leave and that the world will then offer other possibilities. So, one's loneliness is experienced as rooted in a relationship with that place, as opposed to being an enduring characteristic of oneself—it is *here* or *now* that one is lonely. The lack appears primarily in the guise of one's surroundings—they look lonely and also make one feel lonely. But when someone is stuck in a lonely place and restricted in their possibilities for a prolonged, perhaps indefinite period, they are more likely to speak of *being lonely*. There is a diminished sense that the loneliness will or even could be influenced by situational changes—a less pronounced contrast with alternative possibilities.

The most profound forms of loneliness are not experienced in terms of particular places or situations. Even so, insights into the phenomenological structure of loneliness that we gain from a consideration of lonely places can be extended to these cases as well—they involve the same

[18] There are also other contributing factors. For instance, Laing refers to enculturated expectations and, more specifically, those relating to women of a certain age: "I don't suppose it was unrelated, either, to the fact that I was keeling towards the midpoint of my thirties, an age at which female aloneness is no longer socially sanctioned and carries with it a persistent whiff of strangeness, deviance and failure" (2016, p. 15).

[19] See also Dahlberg (2007) and Ratcliffe (in press) for an emphasis on the experience of not belonging or not being at home and on lack of shared participation. As Dahlberg writes, "to be involuntarily lonely and not belonging to anyone or anything is to lack participation in the world" (2007, p. 197).

[20] For instance, Kirova-Petrova (2000, p. 108) describes the loneliness of linguistically diverse children in a school environment as follows: "The children felt separated, disliked, unwanted, cut off from the shared world of the others. The desire to belong to the communal world of their classmates on the one hand and the impossibility of reaching this desire on the other hand created a vacuum not only between them and their peers, but most of all inside themselves".

[21] Hence loneliness, construed in terms of a lack of belonging, is closely related to what Svenaeus (e.g., 2011) calls an experience of "unhomelike being-in-the-world".

configuration of possibilities. For a lonely person, the world as a whole might offer no alternatives to loneliness; it *is* the lonely place. Furthermore, the sense that there even are any alternatives to one's loneliness may be eroded or absent. The loneliness is integral to who one is; it is an enduring limit to one's possibilities—experience as a whole is structured by a sense of interpersonal and social relations as salient but inaccessible.[22] In other words, the loneliness is integral to what I have called "existential feeling", a changeable sense of reality and belonging that can be analyzed in terms of the kinds of significant possibilities that one is able to experience and contemplate (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015).

Although I have emphasized forms of loneliness that arise in response to personal or social situations that disrupt access to possibilities, a lack of access to social and relational possibilities could equally be experienced as a deficit originating in *oneself*. Such experiences lend themselves to talk of feeling or being *empty* inside. The emptiness in question is not a space bereft of concrete contents but a sense of certain possibilities as conspicuously absent from oneself.[23] When no awareness remains of this predicament as situational and thus potentially escapable, it is experienced as integral to who one is. Where a gulf between one's own possibilities and those of others remains salient, there can also be a heightened sense of one's own conspicuousness. One feels different in a way that is inseparable from an experience of *standing out*, and so loneliness is often associated with feelings of shame, awkwardness, and vulnerability. Enns (2022) thus remarks on an apparent "paradox" of loneliness: one is "unseen" and yet feels "exposed", with one's distress "on public display". This can be accounted for by noting that participatory possibilities appear out of reach for oneself but not for others, making one an object to be scrutinized by them rather than a participant in shared situations.

However, it is plausible that not all experiences of loneliness incorporate such contrasts. As one becomes gradually accustomed to a lonely place, the sense of there being an elsewhere for anyone may diminish—habitual expectations are revised and the world comes to offer only those possibilities characteristic of loneliness. One is no longer conspicuously different from others. Where there is no phenomenological contrast between a current situation and possibilities outside of it, we might be said to experience loneliness but without experiencing it *as* loneliness (Tietjen and Furtak 2021). It is arguable that the most profound forms of loneliness involve this kind of inability to experience and contemplate alternative possibilities. For instance, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959, p. 327) writes that "real" loneliness involves a predicament where "*the fact that there were people in one's past life is more or less forgotten and the hope that there may be interpersonal relationships in one's future life is out of the realm of expectation or imagination*". This also renders the experience incommunicable at the time, as one lacks the ability to relate to people in ways that are presupposed by the prospect of successful communication. We might question whether a predicament of this nature still amounts to one of loneliness. However, even though it does not involve the salient absence of possibilities from one's life, it does continue to involve their absence. It also remains the case that a lack of possibilities for social participation is inextricable from a lack of possibilities for interpersonal connection. Furthermore, in coming to recognize that one's experience *had* been restricted in such a way, one might remark, "I didn't realize how lonely I was until now". Hence, the conspicuousness of loneliness or, if you like, its "intensity" can be distinguished from its profundity.

I have suggested that all of these experiences share a common phenomenological structure—a lack of access to possibilities of type p, which are a precondition for accessing possibilities of type q, where p and q concern interpersonal and social relations. There are two distinctive but interdependent aspects to this, which are salient to varying degrees: interpersonal experience is deficient without its usual social backdrop and vice versa. In describing experiences of loneliness, we can move between talk of being or feeling lonely, being in a lonely situation, and finding a place lonely. This, I have argued, is because loneliness is a structural feature of one's emotional experience as a whole, which is not experienced exclusively as a state of oneself or of one's surroundings. It is a way *of finding oneself in a place or situation* and, for some, a configuration of possibilities that constitutes the seemingly inescapable impoverishment of an experiential world.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to Louise Richardson and two referees for helpful comments on an earlier version.

Funding Research for this article was supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant Ref. AH/T000066/1).

[22] Loneliness of this kind is integral to many experiences of depression. As David Karp (1996, p. 16) writes, "much of depression's pain arises out of the recognition that what might make one feel better—human connection—seems impossible in the midst of a paralyzing episode of depression. It is rather like dying from thirst while looking at a glass of water just beyond one's reach". See also Ratcliffe (2015) for an account of interpersonal experience in depression.

[23] This analysis, whereby lonely places and situations are inextricable from feelings of loneliness, remains compatible with there being many different relations between lonely people and lonely places. Although an intense feeling of loneliness might at the same time be an experience of one's surroundings as lonely, it could equally be that a lonely person feels more at home in a lonely place. It is a place where others also seem lonely, thus mitigating the gulf between what they have and one does not.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest.

References

Bound Alberti F (2019) A biography of loneliness: the history of an emotion. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Buber M (1958) I and thou. Trans. RG Smith. T & T Clark, Edinburgh.
Dahlberg K (2007) The enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness. Int J Qual Stud Health Well Being 2:195–207
Enns D (2022) Thinking through loneliness. Bloomsbury Academic, London
Fromm-Reichmann F (1959) Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy: selected papers. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
Husserl E (1948/1973) Experience and judgment: investigations in a genealogy of logic. Trans JS Churchill and K Ameriks. Routledge, London.
Husserl E (2001) Analyses concerning passive and active synthesis: lectures on transcendental logic. Trans AJ Steinbock. Kluwer, Dordrecht.
Karp D (1996) Speaking of sadness: depression disconnection, and the meanings of illness. Oxford University Press, New York
Kirova-Petrova A (2000) Researching young children's lived experiences of loneliness: pedagogical implications for linguistically diverse students. Alberta J Educ Res 46(2):99–116
Laing O (2016) The lonely city: adventures in the art of being alone. Canongate, Edinburgh
Merleau-Ponty M (1945/2012) Phenomenology of perception. Trans D Landes. Routledge, London
Mijuskovic BL (2015) Feeling lonesome: the philosophy and psychology of loneliness. Praeger, Santa Barbara, CA
Motta V (2021) Key concept: loneliness. Philos Psychiatry Psychol 28:71–81
Motta V, Larkin M (2023) Absence of other and disruption of self: an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the meaning of loneliness in the context of life in a religious community. Phenomenol Cogn Sci 22:55–80
Moustakas CE (1972) Loneliness and love. Prentice Hall, New York
Ratcliffe M (2008) Feelings of being: phenomenology, psychiatry, and the sense of reality. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Ratcliffe M (2015) Experiences of depression: a study in phenomenology. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Ratcliffe M (2017) Real hallucinations: psychiatric illness, intentionality, and the interpersonal world. MIT Press, Cambridge
Ratcliffe M (2022) Grief worlds: a study of emotional experience. MIT Press, Cambridge
Ratcliffe M (in press) Loneliness, grief, and the lack of belonging. In Dolezal L, Petherbridge, D (Eds.) Phenomenology of Belonging. SUNY Press, Albany
Roberts T, Krueger J (2021) Loneliness and the emotional experience of absence. South J Philos 59:185–204
Seemann A (2022) The psychological structure of loneliness. Int J Environ Res Public Health 19:1061
Svenaeus F (2011) Illness as unhomelike being-in-the-world: heidegger and the phenomenology of medicine. Med Health Care Philos 14:333–343
Svendsen L (2017) A philosophy of loneliness. Reaktion, London
Tietjen RR, Furtak RA (2021) Loneliness, love, and the limits of language. Southern J Phil 59:435–459
Weiss RS (1973) Loneliness: the experience of emotional and social isolation. MIT Press, Cambridge