



This is a repository copy of *Loneliness is a feminist issue*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/218811/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Wilkinson, E. orcid.org/0000-0001-8660-622X (2022) Loneliness is a feminist issue. *Feminist Theory*, 23 (1). pp. 23-38. ISSN 1464-7001

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211062739>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



Loneliness is a feminist issue

Eleanor Wilkinson 

University of Southampton, UK

Feminist Theory

2022, Vol. 23(1) 23–38

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14647001211062739

journals.sagepub.com/home/fty



Abstract

Loneliness is often described as a deadly epidemic sweeping across the population, a silent killer. Loneliness, we are told, is a social disease that must be cured. But what does it mean to think of loneliness as a feminist issue, and what might a specifically feminist theorisation bring to conceptualisations of loneliness? In this paper, I argue that feminism helps us see that loneliness is not just personal but political. I trace how stories of loneliness surface, circulate, shift and compound within the specificity of the present, centring on recent strategies proposed by the UK government in their ‘national mission to end loneliness’. I outline how this policy discourse upholds certain normative attachments as having the promise to alleviate loneliness: coupled love, the family, community. Such framings serve to depoliticise contemporary conditions of loneliness, positioning loneliness as a personal failure, with the cure for loneliness as the responsibility of individuals and communities. Absent in government depictions of the problem of loneliness are the wider mechanisms that condemn people to lonely lives, when infrastructures fail, when people find themselves violently cut off from the world. Finally, I speculate on what might happen if we were to challenge this framing of loneliness as always and only a problem in need of a cure. I seek to uncover some of the political potentials of loneliness, asking what can be learnt through reflecting upon shared experiences of loneliness? For, as feminist politics has shown us, feelings of disaffection and alienation can help us imagine other worlds.

Keywords

Affect, austerity, emotion, lonely, neoliberalism, queer, single, solitude

What does it mean to think of loneliness as a feminist issue, and what might a specifically feminist theorisation bring to contemporary conceptualisations of loneliness? In this paper, I propose that a feminist approach has more to offer than simply an examination of how

Corresponding author:

Eleanor Wilkinson, Geography & Environmental Science, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK, SO17 1BJ, UK.

Email: e.k.wilkinson@soton.ac.uk

women are affected by loneliness. Rather, feminism can help us trouble prevailing framings of loneliness: where loneliness is still so often equated with aloneness, and positioned as an individual feeling of lack and longing. This paper then, is a critical reading of how the problem of loneliness is framed and narrated, with a particular focus on recent strategies proposed by the UK government in their 'national mission to end loneliness' (DCMS, 2018: 2). I trace how stories of loneliness surface, circulate, shift and compound within the specificity of the present. Throughout, my focus is not on the who or the why of loneliness, but on the question of *what does this discourse of loneliness do?* How is the problem of loneliness framed, and what antidotes are offered as the cure?

Loneliness has increasingly dominated headlines and policy agendas, positioned as a deadly epidemic sweeping across the population. Michael Cobb has written of how we are continually warned 'that a menacing, debilitating feeling of loneliness lurks everywhere' (2012: 6). Loneliness is depicted as a crisis of the present. We live in an age where we must strive to never be lonely, for as Melissa Carroll notes, loneliness is positioned as the 'antithesis of happiness' (2013: 9). Loneliness, we are told, time and time again, is a social disease that must be cured. What follows, then, is an alternative reading of loneliness, one that seeks to trouble some of the dominant ways in which the problem of loneliness is framed and narrated.

How, for instance, does the emergence of the 'loneliness epidemic' fit within broader narratives around individualised responsibility, aspiration and the pursuit of happiness? What can existing work on the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism add to contemporary understandings of loneliness? (Anderson, 2016; Scharff, 2016; Gill, 2017). While there is, of course, a long history of pathologised lonely subjects, more recently we have witnessed the emergence of a narrative where whole swathes of the population are positioned as potentially 'at risk' of loneliness. An atmosphere of anxious apprehension where we are continually told about the risk of loneliness, warned that our lives are getting lonelier than ever before. What work, then, does the language of 'the loneliness epidemic' do? My proposition is that the fear of loneliness holds a powerful grip, which directs us down particular paths, towards the false promise of a cure. Certain attachments, we are told, can mitigate the risk of loneliness: couples, the familial, community. Here, the cure for loneliness is an individualised solution; we must constantly work to avoid loneliness. Reaching out, striving for connection, trying to find ever-present closeness.

What, then, is missing from these dominant ways through which the problem of loneliness is framed, where loneliness is still so often positioned as an individual feeling rather than a structural condition of neoliberal life? What does the language of individualised responsibility and cure overlook? In the argument that follows, I question whether the creation of the seemingly common-sense notion of the 'loneliness epidemic' shuts down potential lines of thought, of ways of conceptualising loneliness otherwise. Foremost, this paper is an attempt to reframe loneliness as a structural condition, rather than as a personal failure or a failure of community. That is, to think of loneliness as a shared condition, as not just personal but political.

The tragic loner

Philip Koch (1994: 31) has defined loneliness as ‘the unpleasant feeling of longing for some kind of human interaction’: loneliness arises when we feel there is a mismatch between the social connections we have and the social connections we desire. To feel lonely, then, is a subjective state, a sense that we are not sufficiently connected to others. Yet, while loneliness and aloneness are seen as conceptually separate, when ‘the loneliest’ are spoken of it is still predominantly a story about those who are alone. Numerous quantitative studies have attempted to determine who is at greatest risk of loneliness, with research highlighting that living alone and being single or separated increase our risk of loneliness (Bu et al., 2020; ONS, 2020). Yet the finding that those who live alone or without a partner are more likely to report feeling lonely is perhaps unsurprising in an age where coupledness and family life are still privileged as our most important social connections, and where a life alone is still so often portrayed as a failure to achieve the good life (see: Roseneil et al., 2020). Feelings of loneliness are not just personal – the lack we feel comes when we measure our lives against a dominant social ideal: against those who we presume are never lonely. It is crucial, then, to consider how individual feelings of loneliness form part of, and are shaped by, dominant social formations, or an emergent ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1978). Feminist work on affective life has long highlighted that we cannot view feelings and emotional life as somehow existing beyond ‘the structural’, but rather we must examine their continual entwinement (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012).

I propose that one of the first steps towards a feminist engagement with loneliness is to trouble popular conceptualisations that reduce loneliness to aloneness: to explore the construction of the figure of the ‘tragic loner’, and to examine how such depictions often uphold a narrow heteronormative vision of intimate life. Perhaps the most dominant lonely figure in our popular imaginaries is that of the bereaved widow/er, an individual whose presumed happy life with a partner has suddenly become a life alone (Uotila et al., 2010). There is, of course, a much longer history of portraying those who live their lives alone as lonely, lacking and unfulfilled. Contemporary constructions of the lonely veer from positioning them as objects of pity, to subjects of fear. Loneliness can often be a dysphoric and painful feeling, as feelings of loneliness turn inwards, a sinking sense of failure at one’s inability to connect to the world. Yet feelings of loneliness and disconnection can also turn outwards, accumulating in resentment, revenge, even violence. Think, for example, of how the figure of the ‘incel’ has been introduced into popular lexicon. Incels emerged within misogynistic online cultures, where outcast male teenage ‘loners’ began to label themselves as ‘involuntary celibates’ after resentfully being unable to find girlfriends. Here, feelings of loneliness are projected outwards. This violence and hatred has been directed most forcefully towards women, with talk of an ‘incel uprising’ and a ‘war on women’ (Nagle, 2017). Compulsory coupledness and toxic masculinity combine, often with devastating consequences (Maxwell et al., 2020). Such extreme examples help shape our wider cultural imaginaries, a cautionary tale about what every male ‘loner’ *might* become, framing those who are lonely not just as sad and depressive, but also bitter and potentially violent.

So, while the figure of the ‘incel’ is one of the starkest examples of the ‘dangerous loner’, other constructions continue to position the lonely as social failures, odd, strange, possibly mad. We could, for example, turn to the contemporary construction of the ‘crazy cat lady’, a lonely tragic figure, whose presumed attempts at romance have failed. Here, narratives of the tragic loner combine with wider discourses around madness, ableism and heteronormativity. Thus, as Will McKeithen notes, we can think of the ‘crazy cat lady’ as existing on the ‘queer periphery’ (2017: 122), her only company being an abundance of feline companions. Such constructions portray the lonely as social failures, their strangeness having resulted in their lonely existence. The figuration of the ‘crazy cat lady’ falls into a far longer history of abjection and stigma against women who live their lives without men, the pathologised figure of the spinster, the witch, the hag (Daly, 1978; Oram, 1992; Love, 2009). Historically, women who live alone, without men, without children, fail to fit within heteronormative ideals of womanhood: where a woman can only find her place in the world through relation to her husband and her children.

This is not, however, to say that those who are alone are instantly classed as lonely; there are plenty of emergent positive representations of being single. A large body of feminist scholarship has started to tell a different story of women who live their lives outside of coupledness (see: Reynolds, 2013; Simpson, 2016; Lahad, 2017). Undoubtedly, there is a more diverse representation of both single life and those who live alone, highlighting how one can be alone but not lonely. Yet despite the growing recognition of single life, there is still often the anxious narrative that waiting too long to ‘settle down’ is to risk a potentially lonely existence. Popular representations of those who are happy alone often depict this as a temporary sojourn. So while single life may now be encouraged for certain periods of our lives, as part of a neoliberal life script where we ‘find ourselves’ before settling down, to wait too long is to risk missing out (Kern, 2011). Thus, as Anthea Taylor notes, despite the increasing acceptance and even celebration of single life for women, ‘the spectre of the spinster looms large in the popular imaginary’ (2011: 2). The loneliest figures in popular representations are still those who live their lives alone: single people, the unattached, those without families. Continued depictions of sad and perpetually lonely figures serve as a reminder to us all that we must seek to avoid chronic loneliness, that we should not ever be alone for too long.

Cultural constructions of loneliness are hence founded upon, and help found, heteronormative logics. Loneliness serves to orientate us; it directs us down a path that we are told will lead us away from a potentially lonely existence. In her work on queer orientations, Sara Ahmed notes how we are directed down the ‘straight line’ (2006: 174), a collective alignment towards heteronormative visions of the good life: to coupledness, marriage, the nuclear family, and a presumed happily ever after. For, as Ahmed notes, ‘[f]ollowing lines [...] involves forms of investment. Such investments “promise” return (if we follow this line, then “this” or “that” will follow)’ (2006: 17). Yet the lines we take are not just shaped by the promise of happiness, but by the fear of loneliness. The fear of loneliness shapes and limits the paths that our lives can take. Certain attachments, we are told, contain the promise to alleviate loneliness; romantic coupled love is still positioned as the primary way to find meaningful connection. So even

while feminist work on single life has reshaped some of these normative life scripts, the spectre of loneliness still haunts us. The melancholic figure of the 'tragic loner', living alone without a partner or family, is still upheld as the cruel fate that potentially awaits us if we do not follow the right path.

However, while there has been important sociological work on how one can live alone, or be single, and still feel connected to the world, far less attention has been given to how we can be surrounded by the presence of others yet still feel lonely. Here, we might want to return to feminist work on coupledness which has highlighted that one does not have to be alone to feel lonely (Friedan, 1963; Comer, 1974). The most intense feelings of loneliness can sweep over us right at the very moment we are supposed to feel connected to others. Think, for example, of the stereotype of the unhappy and isolated suburban housewife. Surrounded by her family, living the life she is told will bring her happiness and fulfilment, yet still she is met with a profound sense of lack and isolation. The path has been followed, but the promise of return has failed. This sense of listless longing is what Betty Friedan described as 'the problem that has no name' (1963: 15). Thus, as Ahmed notes, Friedan 'taught us that proximity to the fantasy of the good life does not mean proximity to happiness' (2010: 51). More recently, feminist scholars have written about the disconnect between the normative promise of happiness and the lives we so often find ourselves living (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011), when the promise of the good life falls short, when we feel alone despite being in the presence of others. Yet this aspect of loneliness is eclipsed in contemporary depictions, and the dominant trope is one where loneliness is equated with aloneness.

The 'loneliness epidemic'

Stories of the tragic loner position loneliness as a cruel or deserved fate that awaits those who are outcast from society. The script tells us that those who are strange, odd and unlovable will lead a lonely and unhappy life. Yet alongside this older narrative is an emergent and somewhat contradictory story that positions loneliness as an epidemic that is sweeping uncontrollably through the population. The biomedical language of the 'loneliness epidemic' has gained considerable traction in public health literature, government policy and the public consciousness. From the 2010s onwards, there have been a mounting number of papers in biomedical journals on the topic of loneliness, media coverage on the 'loneliness epidemic' has become widespread and the problem of loneliness is now a key area of concern for policy makers. By using the language of the 'epidemic', loneliness becomes positioned as ever-escalating, out of control, perhaps even irreversible. Within these framings, loneliness is not just a fate that awaits the strange and the outcast but is something that could impact any one of us at any time. Loneliness is depicted as spreading dangerously through the population, as the following media coverage highlights: '[L]oneliness can be contagious, with sufferers spreading desolate feelings to others "like a bad cold"' (Willey, 2009). Here, lonely people become figures to be avoided, and we are told that '(non-lonely) people who hang out with lonely people are more likely to become lonely themselves' (Remes, 2018). The transmission of loneliness is positioned as infectious, with desolate feelings spreading from one body to the next. Too much proximity to the lonely puts us at risk of

becoming lonely ourselves. What links these two framings – the tragic loner and the escalating epidemic – is the continued emphasis on pathologized individuals and personal responsibility; we must bolster and protect ourselves from the menacing feelings of loneliness that could sweep over us at any time. Yet unlike the story of the tragic loner, the ‘loneliness epidemic’ is framed as a threat to the population as a whole: loneliness as infection, contagion, as an issue that demands a (bio)political intervention.

Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic and the increased media coverage around the loneliness of lockdown, we had been told that loneliness had reached crisis point, that action must be taken. In 2018, the UK government appointed its first Minister for Loneliness, to implement the recommendations made in a report by the Commission on Loneliness. In the foreword note to the first cross-government *Strategy for Tackling Loneliness*, the then Prime Minister Theresa May proclaimed that ‘loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time’ (DCMS, 2018: 2). Within this policy discourse, loneliness is depicted as not just deleterious for mental health but also for physical health. The loneliness strategy opens with the stark warning that ‘[f]eeling lonely often is linked to early deaths – on a par with smoking or obesity. It’s also linked to increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke; depression, cognitive decline and an increased risk of Alzheimer’s’ (DCMS, 2018: 6). Framing the epidemic of loneliness as a public health crisis allows government to claim that loneliness does not just have a detrimental impact on lonely people but also has a devastating impact on society as a whole, not least the ensuing health implications that will result in a costly drain on public services in a time of austerity.

What work, then, does this rhetorical deployment of ‘crisis’ and ‘epidemic’ do? Underpinning this framing of loneliness as at ‘crisis point’ is the assumption that we are currently lonelier than we have ever been. Popular depictions of loneliness pronounce that we are leading lonelier lives than ever before; headline after headline tells us that ‘[L]oneliness [is] on its way to becoming Britain’s most lethal condition’ (Smith, 2018), that ‘loneliness has reached crisis point’ and ‘social isolation is more prevalent than ever’ (Niven-Phillips, 2020). Such accounts help uphold a dystopian narrative where social change has led to a more alienated, disconnected and lonely world. We are repeatedly told that certain conditions of modern life have led to unprecedented levels of loneliness. The *Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* proclaims that ‘as our society continues to evolve [...] the warmth of human contact risks receding from our lives’ (DCMS, 2018: 2). So, what is said to be the cause of this rise in loneliness? A number of factors are repeatedly listed in media speculations around the cause of this epidemic: family breakdown, delays in settling down to start a family, rising numbers of people living parts of their lives alone, greater geographic mobility, fractured communities and technological advances that have supposedly cut us off from face-to-face encounters. Hence, these narratives around the rise in loneliness often fall into a larger moral panic around the decline of the nuclear family, of individualisation and the demise of close-knit communities. Loneliness is depicted as a crisis of our time, the cure for loneliness, is imagined as a return to a time that has been lost.

But is it really possible to say that the times we are currently living through are the loneliest of all? Such narratives often fail to recognise that attempts to measure loneliness

across different epochs are often flawed, given large-scale surveys of loneliness have only relatively recently been introduced and that these surveys are fraught with tensions. What I am interested in here, however, is what does this narrative of ever-escalating loneliness do? Underpinning many of these constructions around the 'epidemic of loneliness' is often a nostalgic longing for a bygone community, a return to a time when people supposedly felt more connected to their families, neighbours and communities. The overarching narrative around the current epidemic of loneliness is one where community has been replaced by rampant individualism, resulting in emptiness, disaffection and loneliness (Bauman, 2003). In that sense, then, discussions around the crisis of loneliness could be read as a plea for a return to a time before neoliberalism, as a revaluation of community and connection. Yet, contrary to this, the framing of the loneliness epidemic is deeply individualised, a predicament that can only be solved by the hard work of individuals, families and communities.

Often, these depictions of 'the loneliness epidemic' rest upon a romanticised nostalgic construction of both familial life and community. Yet, as Miranda Joseph (2002) has noted, we should be wary of this 'romance of community'. In particular, we must be cautious of nostalgic idealised constructions of past communities – which ignore the ways in which the boundaries of such communities were often founded through the exclusion of queer, crip, black and brown bodies. That is, to look beyond the positive feelings that we are told community is meant to evoke, to remember the potential violence enacted in the name of kinship, neighbourliness and togetherness. Idealised visions of close-knit communities overlook violent class divides, often bolsters a wider neoliberal agenda emphasising the need for traditional family values, positioning s and s fam as the antidote to loneliness, and white supremacy. This romanticised nostalgia around bygone communities is, as Ahmed notes, so often 'a nostalgia for whiteness' (2010: 121). Hence, what often underpins this construction of the 'unlonely community' is a heteronormative and racially homogenous vision of community, of happy nuclear families that stay together, of bodies that stay in place. In the UK, a lack of 'cohesive communities' has long been depicted as a 'failure of multiculturalism'. Here, certain bodies are chastised for failing to 'integrate'. Think here of Ahmed's (2010: 142–148) reflections on the lonely figure of the 'melancholy migrant', who is cast out for refusing to 'get over' the injuries of racial injustice. Stories that nostalgically evoke a time when loneliness was supposedly less prevalent overlook both the violence of community and the loneliness of community.

Furthermore, if we look to many of the societal changes that are argued to have led to the current 'epidemic of loneliness', we see that many of these transformations arose as a result of advances made through feminism, particularly changes to family formations and resulting demographic shifts. Women's right to education, paid employment, financial independence and reproductive autonomy has often been followed by falling marriage rates and declining fertility rates. In the UK, co-habitation and solo living have risen, and since the 1970s marriage rates have fallen and divorce rates have increased. Late modernity has transformed the ways in which many people live their intimate lives. What is needed, then, is an awareness of how the current widespread panic over the epidemic of loneliness often bolsters a wider neo-conservative and neoliberal agenda

around the need for traditional family values. Such narratives position strong and stable families as the antidote to loneliness (Wilkinson, 2013). Various studies have sought to show that marriage is a key route to happiness, with those who are married seen as having 'significantly higher life satisfaction than those who are single' (Waite and Lehrer, 2003; Grover and Helliwell, 2019: 373). The solution to the problem of loneliness is positioned as a return to a time when families stayed together. Yet here, just like in the narratives idealising a bygone time of close-knit communities, we have the construction of the time when families were trouble-free and relationships lasted. Once again, this papers over the realities of family life, ignoring the ways in which the familial space of the domestic can be a site of abuse and violence, alienation and unfulfilment, and how the freedom to end relationships should be thought of as a progressive step forward.

The depoliticisation of loneliness

So far, I have outlined how contemporary loneliness is socially stigmatised, and spoken about as public health concern. Whilst seemingly quite distinct, both of these constructions frame loneliness as an individual problem, as something we should constantly strive to protect ourselves against. Aspiration, apprehension, risk, hyper-vigilance: the key moods and modes of neoliberal life. Yet what solutions are proposed to address this so-called epidemic of loneliness? Primarily, loneliness is framed within an individualised model, with many of the strategies for tackling loneliness focusing on the actions that individuals and communities need to take to alleviate loneliness. At the most extreme end, we see an emergent biomedical cure for the problem of loneliness. Take, for example, a nascent body of work in neuroscience that is attempting to better understand the biological symptoms of loneliness. Here, chronic loneliness becomes positioned as something similar to anxiety, so while mild feelings of loneliness are said to be something we all experience at some point in our lives, chronic loneliness is seen to become a psychological disorder when it interferes with our daily capacity to function. The chronically lonely are positioned as debilitated, outcast from a world that values positivity, happiness and success (see Cabanas and Illouz, 2019 for a discussion of the tyranny of positivity). Other work is looking at the potential genetic causes of chronic loneliness, seeking to frame the problem as something that is rooted in biology (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). If loneliness is conceptualised in this way, as an individual disorder, then the cure for loneliness can be found through pharmacological interventions (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2015). Recent media headlines have reported that there might soon be a pill for us to take to cure symptoms of loneliness (Entis, 2019). Neurosteroids are publicised as a 'miracle cure' for the problem of loneliness, that can alter the balance of the brain to make us feel less lonely. Loneliness is reduced to a problem of individual perception and neurological wiring, rather than one of structural abandonment or the failed promise of the good life. Lonely people are positioned as broken, debilitated, and in need of a cure.

Within the UK government's recent work on tackling loneliness, the cure for loneliness is also highly individualised, with an emphasis on self-responsibility and community action. The *Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* has a particular focus on creating

stronger and more connected communities. Loneliness is said to be caused by a fragmented society, and this disconnection is portrayed as a result of the failure of individuals, the failure of families, the failure of community. Take for example, the following quote from the strategy: 'Government can't make our friends for us, and ultimately the challenge of creating a more connected society lies with each of us in our families, neighbourhoods and workplaces' (DCMS, 2018: 3). Here, loneliness is caused by personal failure, a result of an inability to make friends and maintain our own social networks of support. Similarly, the ministerial foreword to a 2021 policy paper on tackling loneliness notes that '[t]he government's approach to tackling loneliness aims to put the individual at the heart of the solution' (DCMS, 2021). What is offered then is a neoliberal fix to loneliness; the creation of a more connected society 'lies with each of us'. The proposed solution to loneliness is one that involves little state intervention or resource; instead, the government will end loneliness by encouraging people to be more neighbourly and create more connected communities, exhorting families to be strong and stable.

There are thus a number of significant omissions in these strategies to address loneliness. Foremost, there is no reflection on how state policy may have led to more fractured communities. Instead, loneliness is portrayed primarily as something that is caused by family and community breakdown, not the actions or inactions of the state. Subsequently, what is so often absent in government depictions of 'the loneliness problem' is any consideration of the wider mechanisms that condemn people to lonely lives, when infrastructures fail, when people find themselves violently cut off from the world and abandoned by the state. For, as Esther Hitchen (2019) highlights, individual feelings of depression and loneliness cannot be separated from state policies that have cut people off from their social worlds. Hitchen goes on to map out the ways in which the uneven geographies of austerity have resulted in what she terms 'shrinking worlds'. Austerity measures in Britain have resulted in the closing down of spaces of vital social infrastructure: with cuts to local authority budgets leading to closures of public libraries, parks, community centres and care services. Austerity has resulted in the closure of vital spaces of connection, especially for those isolated and cut off in other ways, such as the closure of Sure Start children's centres for new mothers (see: Jupp, 2021). Thus, as Hitchen (2019) notes, '[t]he loss of such urban commons embodies a grinding loss of world [...] our collective worlds begin to shrink, slip, and slide away'.

What we have witnessed, then, is a profoundly neoliberal construction of the problem of loneliness; loneliness is reduced to the failure of individuals to connect. As Alison Stenning and Sarah Marie Hall (2018) have argued, the government *Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* fails 'to acknowledge the role of austerity in exacerbating loneliness' and 'appears to be written as if the last ten years of austerity haven't happened' (see also: Batsleer and Duggan, 2020). The strategy opens by telling us that 'loneliness doesn't discriminate': loneliness is depicted as something that can impact any one of us at any time in our lives (DCMS, 2018: 3). There is no mention of poverty, austerity or cuts to vital support services. There is no reflection on how women, and women of colour in particular, have been hardest hit by austerity and cuts to public services (Brah et al., 2015; Sandhu and Stephenson, 2015). In the 2020 'Loneliness Annual Report', the government announced £2 million worth of grant funding to 'better support organisations who work

tirelessly to help people build stronger connections and develop their sense of belonging' (DCMS, 2020: 4). This promise sits in uneasy tension with over a decade of cuts to local authority and charity funding. Moreover, once again the emphasis is on funding to help individuals and communities build stronger connections, papering over the issue of how austerity has cut away at the social infrastructure that people need to maintain their sense of connection to the world. Popular depictions of the 'loneliness epidemic' frequently speculate on the conditions that might have resulted in a rise in loneliness, such as family breakdown and technological shifts, but they often fail to give space to other far more integral causes of social isolation, such as the restructuring of the labour market, the rise in zero hours contracts, mounting housing insecurity, family separation as a result of a hostile immigration policy, the violence of racial capitalism and the securitisation and privatisation of public space, all of which limit our capacity for connection.

Moreover, romanticised ideals of stronger communities overlook the fact that community work is *work*, that social networks take time, and that a sense of place is often impossible to maintain when we find ourselves constantly uprooted. Through my own research on housing insecurity and welfare reform in Britain, I have seen how state actions and state *in*actions can sever our connections, cutting people off from their social networks, creating a weary existence of staying afloat, the daily grind. Precarity and hardship chip away at our sense of connection to the world (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019).

Perhaps, then, at times the language of loneliness is used when we should in fact be talking about structural abandonment, precarity and alienation under late capitalism. The language of loneliness individualises these feelings of lack and longing: the problem is framed as personal rather than structural. The language of loneliness also flattens, precluding any discussion of structural inequalities: loneliness becomes seen as an individual disorder to which anyone might succumb. This framing of loneliness becomes a way to circumvent issues of state abandonment: it downplays the ways in which certain bodies are cast out, forced to endure conditions that so often condemn them to isolated lives, that make connections fragile, that grind us down. The language of the 'loneliness crisis' masks a series of other crises: rising economic precarity, the dismantling of the welfare state, displacement, systemic racism, the continued dominance of heteropatriarchy. My proposition, then, is that rather than seeing loneliness as a biomedical disorder or a personal failure, we can think of loneliness as a structural condition, arising from particular 'violent conditions' (Laurie and Shaw, 2018). The groups who report intense feelings of loneliness are often those who have been cast out by the state – displaced people, young mothers, disabled people. Recent research into loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted that those with a low household income, those who are unemployed, those with lower rates of education and those from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely to report feelings of loneliness: inequality and marginalisation are key risk factors for loneliness (Bu et al., 2020). How often, then, do feelings of loneliness arise because of violent conditions, of living in a world that is hostile to one's very existence? How can we understand loneliness without fully reflecting upon the violent and isolating everyday conditions of white supremacy, dehumanising border regimes, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia? Yet dominant portrayals of loneliness are rarely framed as a structural issue of state abandonment and inequality, or as a question of violence.

Instead, the epidemic of loneliness is portrayed as an individual feeling, a personal problem, a community problem, which every one of us must come together to solve. Medical and individualised discourses around the 'epidemic of loneliness' overshadow attempts to think about loneliness as both a cultural and political phenomenon.

The feminist politics of loneliness

Contemporary constructions often position loneliness as something shameful and potentially pathological. Loneliness is framed as an individual failure, or a failure of community, rather than a structural condition. While loneliness is now understood as widespread, there is still a sense that one should not admit to feeling lonely, as to be lonely is to have failed. To utter the words 'I am lonely' is to be a subject of pity. 'I am lonely' is heard only as a cry for help. Loneliness, we are told, must be cured. But more than this, we must take steps to cure ourselves, we must reach out, find connections: the crisis of loneliness is understood as a personal crisis. Yet, as Eli Clare has so eloquently argued, we need to critically interrogate this notion of the 'cure' and to re-evaluate the worth of lives that are seen to be broken. In his discussion of the power of the notion of 'a cure', Claire notes that '[i]ts promises hold power precisely because none of us want to be broken. But I'm curious: what might happen if we were to accept, claim, embrace our brokenness?' (2017: 160) In a similar light, what might happen if we were to accept and even embrace our loneliness? That is, to shift our discussions of loneliness away from a narrow framework that only speaks of loneliness as a problem in need of a cure. What might it mean to begin to take seriously Denise Riley's (2002) playful proposition on 'the right to be lonely'? But how can we do this without romanticising loneliness, or denying the intense pain that loneliness can bring?

One first step here might be to disrupt the ways in which loneliness is frequently conflated with aloneness, and to highlight that those who are alone are not necessarily lonely. Riley's call for the 'right to be lonely' resists dominant pathologising discourses that frame aloneness as an unequivocal problem, and frees up space to think about loneliness as a potential refusal of the terms 'compulsive sociability' (2002: 9). Feminist and queer studies have a long history of trying to reclaim and revalue their lonely figures, challenging the assumption that those who are alone have somehow failed (Daly, 1978; Love, 2009; Carroll, 2013). Rather than thinking about aloneness as deficit, how might aloneness be a way to create different connections to the world, an opening, a way to live our lives otherwise? In an age of ceaseless stories about the debilitating effects of being alone, the story of how one can be alone but not lonely is still one that needs so desperately to be told.

Following on from this, what would happen if we did not habitually frame connection as the antidote to loneliness? Where would it take us if we were to turn this logic around, and consider whether the issue for some is not too much aloneness, but too much togetherness. Whilst abandonment and isolation can produce toxic conditions of alienation and worldlessness, so too can too much closeness. Think here of the ways in which so many women still take on disproportionate amounts of care work and emotional labour, particularly working-class women of colour: through unpaid work within the familial home, low-paid care work, and as part of transnational care chains (Duffy,

2011; Nguyen et al., 2017). We could also think more broadly about how togetherness and inclusion are so often positioned as a surface solution to appease historical injustice and violence, epitomised in the neoliberal language of institutional diversity work. Calls for 'coming together across difference' overlook the violence and dangers of such work for marginalised groups. For, as Gloria Anzaldúa notes, in her vital reflections on feminist coalition 'bridgework', being 'there' for people *all the time, mediating all the time* means risking being 'walked' on, being 'used' (1990: 223). Too much closeness, too much proximity, can result in the loss of the self. In whose interests then does the fantasy of togetherness serve? In the quest to banish loneliness from our lives, have we at times lost sight of the importance of *separation* for feminist politics?

There is, of course, a long history of work that has argued for the importance of being alone, particularly for creativity, self-reflection and intellectual thought (Sarton, 1973; Storr, 1988; Koch, 1994). Here, solitude is said to be the higher level we reach when we become content in our own company. Such reflections on solitude, however, are often deeply classed, and historically often accounts from white men: the great thinker who has time to retreat from the world, a temporary sojourn, unburdened by labour or care work. Whilst loneliness is seen to limit our capacities, solitude is positioned as a way to connect with ourselves and the world (Arendt, [1951] 1973). Feelings of loneliness, however, are offered no such redemption, portrayed instead as raw emotions, as uncontrollable and wretched feelings of loss and lack. So while solitude has been depicted as an important state of being, feelings of loneliness are positioned as apolitical, even anti-political. Lonely bodies are portrayed as cut off from the world, trapped in an ever inwards spiral.

Yet can we perhaps begin to think about the political potentialities of loneliness itself? Not the capacious openings offered through solitude, but the narrowing, enclosing drag of loneliness – from stark feelings of alienation and being cut off from the world, to the more mundane everyday lonely moments that might overcome us when we least expect. Thus, as Carroll notes, what is needed is 'a space for an understanding of the everydayness of loneliness and its potential to be political' (2013: 4). This is not to say that all forms of loneliness are political. But in our rush to tackle this so-called epidemic of loneliness, have we forgotten to carve out space to consider the potentialities of loneliness? What might be lost in the rush to the cure?

I am interested, then, in how loneliness might be thought of as forming part of a repertoire of what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms 'ugly feelings'. Loneliness opens up a plethora of seemingly trivial feelings, from boredom, disaffection and melancholia, to shame, awkwardness, envy and resentment, none of which we would necessarily think of as having the political potential for progressive social change (Anderson, 2021; Yao, 2021). Of course, some feelings of loneliness might result in a version of Lauren Berlant's (2011) 'cruel optimism'. Feeling lonely may lead us to cling to normative dreams of togetherness, the desire to desperately belong, to enter the realm of the social, the couple, the familial. For, as Laurie Essig contends, 'the worse things get, the more we turn to romance to feel hopeful about the future' (2019: 1). This fear of loneliness holds a powerful grip. At times we might seek solace from loneliness in the promise of intimate attachments that only serve to further exacerbate our feelings of disconnection.

But other feelings of loneliness might lead us elsewhere, particularly those experiences of loneliness that can sweep over us even though we are supposed to be living the good life, the moments when the promise of happiness fails and we are left feeling desperately alone. For, as feminist politics has shown us, feelings of disaffection and alienation can help us imagine other worlds. Feelings of boredom, unfulfilment, and disconnection from everyday life have been a vital starting point for consciousness raising, where collective sharing of these personal experiences of loneliness can become an opening for imagining the world anew. What happens when personal experiences of loneliness become reframed as political problems? What might it mean to begin to boldly speak of the loneliness we feel? Speaking of ourselves as lonely might be a way to open up connections, to find commonality in our shared feelings and experiences of loneliness, unfulfilment and flatness. That is, to claim these feelings of loneliness as something political rather than individual. Such a framing would allow us to see the ways in which loneliness arises not because of personal failure, lack or deficit, but from social conditions where our needs and desires remain unmet. Speaking of loneliness might shatter constructions of the good life, the limits of normative visions of the social and of community. For, as Foucault notes, a lonely life 'is often the result of the poverty of possible relationships in our society, where institutions make insufficient and necessarily rare all relations that one could have with someone else' (1994: 159).

Ultimately, then, I propose that no feminist project should uncritically accept these dominant depictions of 'the loneliness epidemic'. Instead, we need to continue to critically consider which figures are demonised and chastised in contemporary debates around loneliness, and remember that these narratives have a far longer history of stigmatising and vilifying the outcast lonely woman. We must be attentive to the ways in which the problem of loneliness is often framed in a way that upholds other normative and exclusionary ideals: family values, romantic love and nostalgic visions of community. We need to consider how framings of the cure for loneliness narrow our intimate scripts and shut down other life-worlds. Likewise, we must be attentive to the ways in which the language of loneliness is so often used to mask over structural abandonment and violent inaction, to refute the neoliberal positioning of loneliness as solely a personal problem. Loneliness is political. Loneliness is a feminist issue.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Eleanor Wilkinson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8660-622X>

References

- Ahmed, Sara (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, Ben (2016) 'Neoliberal Affects'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(6): 734–753. DOI: 10.1177/0309132515613167.

- Anzaldúa, Gloria (1990) 'Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar or Island: Lesbians-of-Colour Hacienda Alianzas'. In: Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (eds) *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, pp. 216–231.
- Anderson, Ben (2021) 'Affect and critique: A politics of boredom'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 39(2): 197–217. DOI: 10.1177/02637758211002998.
- Arendt, Hannah ([1951] 1973) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Batsleer, Janet and James Duggan (2020) *Young and Lonely: the Social Conditions of Loneliness*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2003) *Liquid Love: on the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Oxford: Polity.
- Berlant, Lauren (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brah, Avtar, Ioana Szeman and Irene Gedalof (2015) 'Introduction: Feminism and the Politics of Austerity'. *Feminist Review*, 109(1): 1–7. DOI: 10.1057/fr.2014.59.
- Bu, Feifei, Andrew Steptoe and Daisy Fancourt (2020) 'Who Is Lonely in Lockdown? Cross-Cohort Analyses of Predictors of Loneliness Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Public Health*, 186: 31–34. DOI: 10.1016/j.puhe.2020.06.036.
- Cabanas, Edgar and Eva Illouz (2019) *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: how the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cacioppo, Stephanie and John T. Cacioppo (2015) 'Why May Allopregnanolone Help Alleviate Loneliness?'. *Medical Hypotheses*, 85(6): 947–952. DOI: 10.1016/j.mehy.2015.09.004.
- Cacioppo, John T. and William Patrick (2008) *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W Norton & Company.
- Carroll, Melissa (2013) *Lonely Affects and Queer Sexualities: a Politics of Loneliness in Contemporary Western Culture*. PhD thesis, McMaster University, Canada. Available at: <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/13537/1/fulltext.pdf> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Clare, Eli (2017) *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cobb, Michael (2012) *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*. New York: New York University Press.
- Comer, Lee (1974) *Wedlocked Women*. Leeds: Feminist Books.
- Daly, Mary (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2018) *A Connected Society: a Strategy for Tackling Loneliness—Laying the Foundations for Change*. HM Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2020) *Loneliness Annual Report: the First Year*. London: HM Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/loneliness-annual-report-the-first-year> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2021) *Emerging Together: the Tackling Loneliness Action Plan*. London: HM Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emerging-together-the-tackling-loneliness-network-action-plan> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Duffy, Mignon (2011) *Making Care Count: a Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Entis, Lauren (2019) *A Pill for Loneliness*, Medium, January 15th, <https://onezero.medium.com/scientists-are-working-on-a-pill-for-loneliness-79ee7e80373c>
- Essig, Laurie (2019) *Love, Inc.: Dating Apps, the Big White Wedding, and Chasing the Happily Neverafter*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

- Foucault, Michel (1994) 'The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will'. In: Paul Rainbow (ed) *Ethics, Subjectivity & Trust: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984. Vol. 1*. New York: The New Press, pp. 157–162.
- Friedan, Betty (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gill, Rosalind (2017) 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: a Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6): 606–626. DOI: 10.1177/1367549417733003.
- Grover, Shawn and John F. Helliwell (2019) 'How's Life at Home? New Evidence on Marriage and the Set Point for Happiness'. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 20(2): 373–390. DOI: 10.1007/s10902-017-9941-3.
- Hitchen, Esther (2019) 'Shrinking Worlds: Austerity and Depression'. *Antipode Online*. Available at: <https://antipodeonline.org/2019/03/07/shrinking-worlds-austerity-and-depression/> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Joseph, Miranda (2002) *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jupp, Eleanor (2021) 'Emotions, Affect and Social Policy: Austerity and Children's Centers in the UK'. *Critical Policy Studies*. Online early. DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2021.1883451.
- Kern, Leslie (2011) *Sex and the Revitalized City: Gender, Condominium Development, and Urban Citizenship*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Koch, Philip (1994) *Solitude: a Philosophical Encounter*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.
- Lahad, Kinneret (2017) *A Table for One: a Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Laurie, Emma W. and Ian G.R. Shaw (2018) 'Violent Conditions: the Injustices of Being'. *Political Geography*, 65: 8–16. DOI: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.03.005.
- Love, Heather (2009) 'Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics'. *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 55(3): 305–334. DOI: 10.1353/esq.0.0042.
- Maxwell, December, Sarah R. Robinson, Jessica R. Williams and Craig Keaton (2020) "'A Short Story of a Lonely Guy': a Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit". *Sexuality & Culture*, 24(4): 1852–1874. DOI: 10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6.
- McKeithen, Will (2017) 'Queer Ecologies of Home: Heteronormativity, Speciesism, and the Strange Intimacies of Crazy Cat Ladies'. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(1): 122–134. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276888.
- Nagle, Angela (2017) *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. London: Zero Books.
- Ngai, Sianne (2005) *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nguyen, Minh T.N., Roberta Zavoretti and Joan Tronto (2017) 'Beyond the Global Care Chain: Boundaries, Institutions and Ethics of Care'. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 11(3): 199–212. DOI: 10.1080/17496535.2017.1300308.
- Niven-Phillips, Lisa (2020) 'Loneliness Has Reached Crisis Point, But What's Being Done to Tackle It?'. *Harpers Bazaar*, 2 February. Available at: <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/beauty/mind-body/a30725373/loneliness-epidemic-how-to-cope/> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Oram, Alison (1992) 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses'. *Women's History Review*, 1(3): 413–433. DOI: 10.1080/09612029200200010.
- Pedwell, Carolyn and Anne Whitehead (2012) 'Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory'. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2): 115–129. DOI: 10.1177/1464700112442635.

- Remes, Olivia (2018) 'Loneliness Is Contagious—And Here's How to Beat It'. *The Conversation*, 13 July. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/loneliness-is-contagious-and-heres-how-to-beat-it-94376> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Reynolds, Jill (2013) *The Single Woman: a Discursive Investigation*. London: Routledge.
- Riley, Denise (2002) 'The Right to Be Lonely'. *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13(1): 1–13.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund et al. (2020) *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate Citizenship Regimes in a Changing Europe*. London: UCL Press.
- Sandhu, Kalwinder and Mary-Ann Stephenson (2015) 'Layers of Inequality—A Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessment of the Public Spending Cuts on Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in Coventry'. *Feminist Review*, 109(1): 169–179. DOI: 10.1057/fr.2014.41.
- Sarton, May (1973) *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: Norton.
- Scharff, Christina (2016) 'The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(6): 107–122. DOI: 10.1177/0263276415590164.
- Simpson, Roona (2016) 'Singleness and Self-Identity: the Significance of Partnership Status in the Narratives of Never-Married Women'. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 33(3): 385–400. DOI: 10.1177/0265407515611884.
- Smith, Joe (2018) 'Loneliness on Its Way to Becoming Britain's Most Lethal Condition'. Independent, 30 April. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/loneliness-lethal-condition-therapy-psychology-cox-commission-ons-health-a8311781.html> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Stenning, Alison and Sarah Marie Hall (2018) 'On the Frontline: Loneliness and the Politics of Austerity'. *Discover Society*. Available at: <https://discoversociety.org/2018/11/06/on-the-frontline-loneliness-and-the-politics-of-austerity/> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Storr, Anthony (1988) *Solitude: a Return to the Self*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Taylor, Anthea (2011) *Single Women in Popular Culture: the Limits of Postfeminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Uotila, Hanna, Kirsi Lumme-Sandt and Marja Saarenheimo (2010) 'Lonely Older People as a Problem in Society – Construction in Finnish Media'. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 5(2): 103–130. DOI: 10.3384/ijal.1652-8670.1052103.
- Waite, Linda J. and Evelyn L. Lehrer (2003) 'The Benefits from Marriage and Religion in the United States: a Comparative Analysis'. *Population and Development Review*, 29(2): 255–275. DOI: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2003.00255.x.
- Wilkinson, Eleanor (2013) 'Learning to Love Again: "Broken Families", Citizenship and the State Promotion of Coupledness'. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, 49: 206–213. DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.02.012.
- Wilkinson, Eleanor and Iliana Ortega-Alcázar (2019) 'The Right to be Weary? Endurance and Exhaustion in Austere Times'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44(1): 155–167. DOI: 10.1111/tran.12266.
- Wiley, Jo (2009) 'Loneliness: Contagious "Like a Bad Cold"'. *Daily Express*, 1 December. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/143326/Loneliness-Contagious-like-a-bad-cold> (accessed 6 December 2021).
- Williams, Raymond (1978) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yao, Xine (2021) *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Duke University Press.