

EXPLORATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

Narratives of Loneliness

Multidisciplinary Perspectives from
the 21st Century

Edited by
Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller



Narratives of Loneliness

Rising life expectancies and declining social capital in the developed world mean that an increasing number of people are likely to experience some form of loneliness in their lifetimes. *Narratives of Loneliness* tackles some of the most pressing issues related to loneliness, showing that whilst recent policies on social integration, community building and volunteering may go some way to giving an illusion of not being alone, ultimately, they offer a rhetoric of togetherness that may be more seductive than ameliorative, as the condition and experience of loneliness is far more complex than commonly perceived.

Containing thought-provoking contributions from researchers and commentators in several countries, this important work challenges us to rethink some of the burning issues of our day with specific reference to the causes and consequences of loneliness. Topics include the loneliness and mental health of military personnel, loneliness and social media, loneliness and sexuality, urban loneliness and the experiences of transnational movement and adopted children. This book, therefore makes an overdue multidisciplinary contribution to the emerging debate about how best to deal with loneliness in a world that combines greater and faster connectedness on the one hand with more intensely experienced isolation on the other.

Since Émile Durkheim first claimed that the structure of society could have a strong bearing on psychological health in the 1890s, researchers in a range of disciplines have explored the probable impact of social context on mental health and well-being. Interdisciplinary in approach, *Narratives of Loneliness* will therefore be of great interest to academics, postgraduate students and researchers in social sciences, the arts, psychology and psychiatry.

Olivia Sagan is a Chartered Psychologist and Counsellor. She is Head of Division for Psychology and Sociology at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh.

Eric D. Miller is Associate Professor of Psychology at Kent State University, USA.

Explorations in Mental Health

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Contributors

Stuart Andrews is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at the University of Surrey (UK). He researches performance and place, and is currently developing two monographs, one on performing home and one, with Matthew Wagner, on the door in performance.

Rhiannon Corcoran is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool where she is the Academic Director of the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy and Practice. Rhiannon's longstanding research into social cognition and the psychology of mental health and wellbeing is highly cited and internationally renowned. In more recent years Rhiannon's interests have turned to the consideration of the wider determinants of mental health and wellbeing with a particular interest in place and community. She directs the Community Wellbeing evidence programme of the National What Works Centre for Wellbeing. She works closely with her built and living environment professional partner, Graham Marshall, on the Prosocial Place Programme, aiming to understand how the places we live affect our psychological responses and our mental health and wellbeing. She is a member of the community engagement advisory panel informing the government's Estate Regeneration National Strategy.

Rob Cover is Associate Professor and Discipline Chair of Media and Communication and the University of Western Australia. He is Chief Investigator on a current ARC Discovery Project examining the conditions and frameworks of LGBT youth support. His recent books include: *Queer Youth Suicide, Culture and Identity: Unliveable Lives?* (Ashgate, 2012), *Vulnerability and Exposure: Footballer Scandals, Masculine Identity and Ethics* (UWAP, 2015) and *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self* (Elsevier, 2015).

Roger Frie is Professor of Education at Simon Fraser University and Affiliate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and Faculty and Supervisor at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology in New York. He writes on the intersection of psychoanalysis, philosophy and social theory and has published seven books in this area. His newest book is *Not in My Family: German*

Memory and Responsibility After the Holocaust (Oxford, 2017). Additionally he is co-editor of *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* and an editorial board member of *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* and *Psychoanalytic Psychology*.

Maude Gauthier is a post-doctoral fellow in the Sociology Department at Lancaster University (UK), where she conducts research on the mobility of singles. Her research interests focus on queer and feminist studies, as well as media, technology and mobility studies. She received her PhD in Communication Studies from Université de Montréal (Canada). Her dissertation examined contemporary transformations of intimacy, from family to friendship, as it was experienced in the everyday life of her personal network of relationships. She teaches courses on communication theories as well as media, sexuality and gender. Maude is also affiliated with the group Ageing Communication Technologies, which examines the mediated experiences of adults in later life. She collaborates on research projects that have both scholarly and community outcomes related to ageing and technologies.

Margarita Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė is a sociologist working as a researcher at the Lithuanian Social Research Centre (Vilnius) and as a lecturer at the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University. After receiving a Master of Arts in sociology and social anthropology from the Central European University (Budapest, Hungary), she earned a PhD in sociology from Vilnius University and Lithuanian Social Research Centre (joined doctoral programme). She was a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Sociology, Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). Her areas of interest include intergenerational relationships, transnational family and ageing. She has published over 20 articles on ageing and welfare of the elderly; intergenerational relationships and their predictors; the effects of migration on intergenerational solidarity.

Peter Joseph Gloviczki (PhD University of Minnesota, Mass Communication, 2012) works as an assistant professor of communication at Coker College in Hartsville, South Carolina, where he also serves as coordinator of the communication program. His first book is *Journalism and Memorialization in the Age of Social Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Yvonne Hill is Senior Lecturer in Research Education at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln working within the School of Teacher Development. Her research activities cover three broad interrelated areas: in the first strand she locates empirical data about the everyday experiences of teachers' work and lives through collaborative action research and the use of narrative methodologies. Within the second strand of research she examines how creativity is defined and positioned within the university curriculum in order to extend student engagement and enhancement. Finally a recurring theme in her work is feminist critical pedagogy. She is currently working on funded project on "Social constructions of student satisfaction and pedagogues of

dissatisfaction”, winning a Taylor and Francis award for the most promising research publication (2015).

Rob Imrie is Visiting Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has international expertise in urban governance, architecture and community development in cities; the impact and implications of urban policy; the geographies of disability and the built environment; and the body, embodiment and urban design.

Helen E. Lees is a Reader in Alternative Education Studies at Newman University, Birmingham. She specialises in three areas of research: alternative education, silence and sexuality. As an adopter herself she is interested in the social intersections of these matters in determining how people act with each other about taboo and silenced topics often found too difficult to bring into conversations. She sees research conversations as enacting sharing and breaking of such silences.

Nicholas Manganas completed his PhD in International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in 2010. He is the author of *Las dos Españas: Terror and Crisis in Contemporary Spain* published with Sussex Academic Press in 2016. He has also published widely in journals including *Culture, Theory and Critique* and *Comparative Literature and Culture*. After almost a decade working and researching in Spain he currently teaches in the In-Country Studies program at the School of International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

Graham Marshall is an award winning urban designer and landscape architect and a Visiting Senior Fellow at the University of Liverpool's Heseltine Institute for Public Policy and Practice. During a career spent designing and changing places, Graham's achievements include being Design Team Leader for National Garden Festival Wales, Development Planning and Design Director at Liverpool Vision and Urban Design Advisor to the London Development Agency and Greater London Authority. While running his own consultancy, Graham has teamed up with Professor Rhiannon Corcoran to direct the Prosocial Place Programme aiming to change the way we design and look after our urban environments, putting the mental wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities at the forefront. Graham has been active member of several UK Design Review Panels and is a Built Environment Expert with Design Council CABE.

Eric D. Miller, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Kent State University (East Liverpool Campus) in Ohio. His primary research and scholarly focus has examined how adults cope with and adjust to loss and other adverse events.

Philip S. Morrison is Professor of Human Geography in the School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He undertakes research into population geography, economic

geography, labour and housing markets, social inequality and subjective well-being (including loneliness). He received a PhD degree in geography from the University of Toronto and a Master of Arts from Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

Olivia Sagan is Head of Psychology & Sociology at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. A chartered psychologist and counsellor, her research focusses on the phenomenology of mental illness through long term biographic narrative data to which she turns a phenomenological psychoanalytic lens in the pursuit of understanding the nuance of the teller's experience and the trajectory of independently developed means by which to manage the difficulties of living. Her book *Narratives of Art Practice and Mental Wellbeing: Reparation and Connection* was published by Routledge in 2014.

Sandra Costa Santos is Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Northumbria (Newcastle upon Tyne). She has previously taught and lectured at architecture schools in the UK, Spain and Ireland. With a background in architectural practice both in UK and overseas, Santos' work is underpinned by the understanding of architecture as a discipline that is receptive to cross-disciplinary scholarship and investigates architectural theory, with a particular interest in the relationship between architecture and place making.

Rebekah Smith is a Masters of Science in Human Geography graduate from the School of Geography, Environment, and Earth Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. For her thesis, she undertook research into the relationships between loneliness, social connectedness and place in New Zealand. She went on to work as a Project Officer at the National Institute of Mental Health Research (now named the Centre for Mental Health Research) at the Australian National University. She currently works as a Data Manager and Research Officer in the Epidemiology Section of the Health Improvement Branch of ACT Health.

Zahava Solomon, PhD, is a Professor of Social Work at Tel Aviv University and the head of the multidisciplinary Israel Center of Research Excellence (I-CORE) for the investigation of mass trauma. Her groundbreaking longitudinal studies focus on traumatic stress with an emphasis on combat stress reactions, war captivity and ongoing terror. She has earned numerous awards including the Laufer Award for Outstanding Scientific Achievement in the field of PTSD, Prize of Israel in Social Work and the EMET Prize in Social Sciences, Social Work.

Jacob Y. Stein, PhD, is a post-doctoral research fellow at the multidisciplinary Israel Center of Research Excellence (I-CORE) for the investigation of mass trauma at the Bob Shapell School of Social Work at Tel Aviv University. His studies are interdisciplinary, and include both quantitative and qualitative investigations of trauma and its aftermath. His research focuses primarily on

the ramifications of war-induced trauma, loneliness and interpersonal connection in the aftermath of war and war-captivity.

Julian Stern is Professor of Education and Religion at York St John University. He was a school teacher for 14 years, and has worked in universities for 25 years. Julian is widely published, having written 13 books and over 30 articles.

Angie Voela is a Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial Studies, University of East London. She has published on gender, feminist approaches to identity; psychoanalysis and philosophy; identity, space and politics, individual and society; identity and education. She is the co-editor of *We Need to Talk about Families: Essays on Neoliberalism, the Family and Popular Culture* (Cambridge Scholars, 2016) and *Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Myth in Contemporary Culture: After Oedipus* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

Alette Willis holds a PhD in Human Geography and Environmental Studies from Carleton University. She is currently Chancellor's Fellow in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh and Storyteller in Residence to the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. In addition to a range of academic publications, she has recently co-written a collection of folktales re-imagined for use in environmental education: *Dancing with Trees: Eco-Tales from the British Isles* (History Press, Bath, 2017).

Foreword

Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

In *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, editors Sagan and Miller bring together leading workers on the topic of loneliness to explore nuances of this topic in the 21st century. Their volume is particularly timely and valuable because of the continued epidemic of loneliness in our world. It also is a valuable contribution in that the contributors represent diverse disciplines and examine loneliness in terms of multicultural perspectives, with a well-measured dose of narrative and common sense psychology.

An interesting conclusion one might derive from these chapters is that despite the increasing interconnectedness of millions of people via social media and the Internet, the epidemic of loneliness may be increasing at the same time. It is a loneliness born not only out of swift and immense technological change but also out of the ages-old human dilemma of finding meaning in the midst of such change and inevitable conflict across groups of people and historical eras (cf. Viktor Frankl's 1946 *Man's Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press).

This book makes valuable inputs about loneliness in contexts as varied as mental illness, the media, creative works, architecture and non-verbal behaviour. I heartily recommend this new and richly unorthodox work on an old and ever-important aspect of the human condition.

By John H. Harvey,
Professor of Psychology, Emeritus,
University of Iowa



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Introduction by the editors

Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller

Loneliness is personal. It is also political.

Olivia Laing, 2016, p. 281

On hearing one of the editors give a talk about her research in loneliness and mental well-being, a first-year undergraduate psychology student stayed behind afterwards. She said she never knew loneliness was something that was being researched, or even that it was something that *could* be researched. It was impossible not to be moved by the engaged and wistful look on her face as she asked how she could get involved. So thank you, Jennifer, for reminding us all over again how captivating a subject loneliness is and how something about it touches a very human part of us in ways poignant and unsettling.

Loneliness in the 21st century, as Laing reminds us, is both intensely personal and unavoidably political. As a subject and concern, it wholly deserves the attention it is currently receiving from the disciplines represented in this book, as well as others that we were not able to include. As both editors are psychologists, we have long encountered our own discipline's interest in loneliness and an overview of this forms the opening chapter by Morrison and Smith. And while the names of the pioneers in this field will be read frequently as you delve into this anthology, they deserve an additional moment of homage. In their creation of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, among some of the earliest scholars to document this construct were Russell, Peplau and Cutrona (1980). No book on the subject should fail to mention the contributions, too, within psychology, of John and Stephanie Cacioppo, Louise Hawkley, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Daniel Perlman, Ami Rokach, Robert Weiss and their respective colleagues, whose names stand in this book as touchstones. Their work has not only shone a light on the prevalence of loneliness in our societies and the groups that constitute them but also put forward ways of measuring its impact and its correlations with other psychosocial and health factors. The messages of their work have generated and underpinned numerous campaigns. In Britain, for instance, which is, according to the Office for National Statistics the loneliness capital of Europe, the 'Campaign to End Loneliness' is just one example. Launched in

2011, it has a network of supporters numbering thousands – and such high-profile activity has helped translate research into policy.

As the editors of this volume, we largely accept the constructions of loneliness as they have been presented in psychological research and to a great extent in this book: as a psychological state where one does not have the relational interactions (e.g., in terms of number, quality, or satisfaction) that one wishes one had; we acknowledge too its demonstrated consequences, with the correlates of loneliness being largely associated with negative affect and the causes of loneliness being varied, chief among them include unfulfilling relationships or separations, personal deficits or other inadequacies and perceptions of social marginality.

That said, we would also like to entertain two points that sometimes have not necessarily been as clearly elucidated in the literature when considering the nature of loneliness: firstly that loneliness can be a socially constructed concept and secondly that loneliness can be associated with some positive outcomes. In regards to the former point, Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015) imply that the mere use of the term “loneliness” may connote negative reactions in others and that our understandings of loneliness often fail to fully appreciate the nature of the relational aspect of the other, which might contribute to these feelings. As previously noted, though a modest correlation between loneliness and introversion tends to be present, these constructs should not be viewed as overlapping in an absolute sense. Cain (2012) discusses that the experience of being alone is not inherently problematic – though Western culture and society tends to more likely encourage and reward extraverted behaviour. Perhaps it is wise to therefore suggest that loneliness may be problematic to an individual only once one deems it to be so, echoing – not for the first time in psychology – Epictetus’s axiom that it is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.

And yet it may also be prudent for individuals to re-examine their perceived sources of loneliness and question whether such feelings exist due to societal-based pressures (such as a belief that one needs to be socially popular and active). The field of psychology has long featured many humanist thinkers, in particular, such as Carl Rogers (1961) and Victor Frankl (1959) who have emphasized the importance of constructing authentic lives where individuals strive to create their own personal sense of meaning; consistent with these well-known perspectives, those who feel lonely might gently be urged to explore whether the possible sources of their loneliness are due to social pressures from others or society.

In regards to understanding any possible positive effects of loneliness, while Long, Seburn, Averill and More (2003) again remind us that context matters in terms of understanding the effects of solitude, solitude often allows for many positive possibilities including increased inner peace, self-discovery and spirituality. Miller and Harvey (2001) argued that, as paradoxical as it may sound, an individual might ultimately find that trauma or grief can gradually allow him or her to find greater meaning in life and with respect to his or her loss. In

a similar sense, feelings of loneliness may help to motivate individuals to find ways to overcome and come to terms with these perceptions to their benefit.

In exploring loneliness across disciplines outwith psychology, we have also been inspired by the penetrating contribution of contemporary philosophy, with its nuanced considerations of loneliness as “the dominant psychic force underlying all human consciousness and conduct” (Mijuskovic, 2012, p. 4), in particular phenomenology, with thinkers such as Clark Moustakas, Eric Fromm and, enduringly, Hannah Arendt (1973) and Martin Heidegger who each gave loneliness as a human condition the big-picture consideration it deserves.

Psychoanalysis, too, has contributed incisive observations of loneliness (Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Winnicott, 1958) with Melanie Klein’s paper from 1963 hauntingly describing how one comes to feel so utterly emptied out by it. And the psychoanalytic contributions continue. In 2013, editors Richards, Spira and Lynch gathered a provocative collection of contemporary papers on the subject in their *Encounters with Loneliness: Only the Lonely*. Their anthology reminds us once again of the complexity of loneliness and its ravages, as well as its relationship with early developmental trauma which tragically leaves the self vulnerable to “unendurable levels of anxiety and depression” in which “loneliness is an effect that seems endless” (Stern, 2013, p. 63). Loneliness and longing do indeed “constitute core components” (Willock, 2013, p. 295) of the key constructs of psychoanalysis, and the deep and sensitised understanding of the forms it takes within psychoanalytic writings is extraordinary.

In the second chapter of this anthology, Roger Frie provides a synthesis of these two great disciplines, putting forward a concept of loneliness grounded in the human capacity for love, whilst in Chapter 19, Angie Voela offers a sophisticated and provocative weaving of psychoanalytic and philosophic ideas, applying them to a very 21st-century film critique. It is further testament to the intellectual pull of the subject of loneliness, not to mention the visceral and subjective experience of it, that thinkers from disciplines such as political science (Dunn, 2008) and from traditions such as Buddhism (Sarvananda, 2012) have also felt compelled to write about loneliness and do so rather beautifully.

So what of loneliness and the 21st century? We write from within US and UK societies, which, it seems, share so many descriptive names: neoliberal, post-democratic, liquid, post-capitalist, post-modern – and from a historical ‘post-truth’ moment of ‘alternative facts’ that many commentators deem to herald a new world order shaped by a new ideological paradigm. Citizens of this new order with its freshly inaugurated Trumpenproletariat and Brexiteers are witnessing a slide towards populism, what Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde referred to as a “thin-centered ideology” (2004, p. 543) – a slide so concerning in its ‘us and them’ polarisation that it even impelled Prince Charles to issue a warning about it on BBC Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* on 22 December 2016. Spurred on by the impact of shock economics, geopolitical volatility, perceived porousness of borders, the bite of austerity (e.g. Sennett, 2007), levels of poverty that sit squarely besides ostentatious displays of extravagance and consumption

and exhausted by news of looming climatic tipping points, we may indeed be fellow habitants of E. O. Wilson's (2007) Eremozoic Era – the Era of Loneliness, as Willis, in Chapter 14, points out. It is difficult to resist the feeling that there is indeed some seismic change occurring in the contemporary global context – one that increases its flammability.

In this Era of Loneliness, we are witnessing a wholesale destruction of our planet suggestive of either a collective cognitive dissonance or a particularly insidious form of denial. We are learning, too, to live with a sense of international impotence in the face of crimes against humanity, with responses to the biggest refugee crisis since WW2 so delayed and inadequate that we have stunned ourselves. It is little wonder that people are turning to old religions with replenished and sometimes dangerous zeal and to newer religions of social media and hyperconsumerism. Clinging to a deification of the self, unsurprisingly as “the culture of atomisation and loneliness in neoliberal societies is intensified by offering the self as the only source of enjoyment, exchange and wonder” (Giroux, 2015, p. 159), we experiment with alternative off-grid thinking that easily elides into a new form of paranoid survivalist living with shades of Lasch's (1984) ‘apocalyptic survivalism’. Insulated and isolated, we have turned in droves to a nostalgia for the collective homespun – cupcakes, street parties and bunting, harbouring deep longings for a long-lost sense of neighbourhood. Our allotments, street parties and assorted incarnations of community are shot through, however, with an uneasy notion of skulking geopolitical cyberterrorism as we are watched, always watched by a state mining vast quantities of data with which to deftly reconfigure its citizens “as both potential terrorists and a vast consumer market” (Giroux, 2015, p. 156). In our workplaces no less, as Hill describes in Chapter 15, we are both subjected to surveillance and subjects of self-surveillance in an increasingly isolated work environment that extolls collaboration even while it fragments – the “rough neoliberal beast” (Ball, 2012, p. 17) pitting colleague against colleague.

No wonder we're interested in the subject of loneliness. Our 24/7 connectivity amidst this, inherent to this, also means 24/7 connectedness to our basest fears, along with 24/7 exposure. As Gauthier notes in Chapter 7, these technologies of connectivity “constitute novel ways to experience disconnections”. Miller too, in Chapter 5, describes how the relationship between our online connectedness and human connectedness is by no means straightforward. As the boundary between public and private is eroded to thin, then nothing, then memory, we may well be all internetted up with nowhere to go. “Loneliness,” warns Charles Handy (2015, p. 208) “can just be an empty inbox on your phone”.

It would seem that the stage has been set for some time for a fresh rush of loneliness, already the most “widespread ‘disorder’ of our time” (Verhaeghe, 2015, p. 206). When in the United Kingdom, the Labour MP Jo Cox was brutally murdered on 16 June 2016 on the streets of Birstall, West Yorkshire, by a man who shouted “Put Britain first”, she was known to be preparing to make tackling loneliness a key priority in her political role, inspired by her work with

the overlooked, the marginalised and, in particular, the refugee. Yet the battle cry of her murderer was one of many insidious expressions of anger said by some to be fuelled by accumulated feelings of being overlooked, isolated or forgotten. Such feelings of dislocation are thought to have contributed to both the surprising upset election victory of Donald J. Trump in the US presidential election as well as the United Kingdom's 'Brexit' vote in 2016.

The World Health Organisation already expects depressive disorders to rank second amongst the global disease burden by 2020, and the correlation between mental distress and loneliness has long been demonstrated. Amidst this, a question about loneliness immediately emerges. Are we really lonelier than ever in the 21st century, more subject to its tenacious hold? Or is it that we are less equipped, somehow, to confront it and to even entertain the possibility that loneliness is, in the words of Clark Moustakas (1961, p. ix) "an experience of being human which enables the individual to sustain, extend, and deepen his humanity". Loneliness has become taboo, "difficult to confess" (Laing, 2016, p. 4) and, as Stern points out in Chapter 10, shame and guilt accompany it.

It is hard not to conclude that the particular socioeconomic framework within which we live, commonly termed neoliberalism, with its emphasis on self-responsibility, individualised citizenry, economic achievement, social success, material affluence and the pressure for the high and constant visibility of these attributes may well make those falling outside the mould of the fantasised and promoted 21st-century citizen quickly feel like failures, less than and alone. Those prone to loneliness are hit by the double whammy of feeling lonely *and* being stigmatised as 'losers' in a super-connected, how-many-friends-have-you-got, Facebooked, Tweeting, Instagrammed culture. Within this culture, lonely people swiftly get to blame themselves for not being proactive, for not taking the steps to make friends, for not making a positive choice to change to be the person they want to be, indeed for not doing what the self-help psychobabbling cauldron of advice merchants tell them: to 'simply' get out and connect, as though either life or loneliness were that simple. Since the science of behavioural change took flight and nudge economics became the darling of global governments and their armies of 'choice architects' (Thaler and Sunstein (2008), the happiness industry has been doing a brisk trade with the proliferation of McMindfulness not escaping the critical eye of some sceptics (Barnett, 2015). With happiness reinvented as "a measurable, visible, improvable entity," which has "penetrated the citadel of global economic management" (Davies, 2015), it is beholden on us to smile or die (Ehrenreich, 2010), regardless of what kind of hand life has dealt us, or is currently dealing us. How does that diktat feel when you're down and alone, and really, really cannot reach out – for a 101 sound reasons? As Sagan, in Chapter 8 explores, the interface of loneliness, socio-political context and mental illness is murky and difficult.

This book hopes to offer a deeper context in which people negotiate loneliness and, indeed, in a more optimistic vein, how such 21st-century tools such as social media may help with some of the grief and loss we encounter, as

Gloviczki asserts in Chapter 4. It offers perspectives perhaps new to loneliness studies, ones that grapple with 21st-century shifts in the ways in which we live with ourselves and others, as explored in Chapters 11, 12 and 13 by Corcoran, Marshall, Imrie and Santos, and the ways in which we move about the planet and settle, or remain unsettled (Gedvilaitė-kordušienė in Chapter 6 and Lees in Chapter 9), or indeed attempt to *resettle* after the experience of war has taken its toll (Stein and Solomon, Chapter 3). In Chapters 16 and 18, Cover and Manganas provide work from within queer studies that examines the lonelines in the fabric of our sexual identity as it is perceived, challenged, celebrated or negated by society. In Chapters 17 and 19, Andrews and Voela remind us once again that art can, and does, offer excavations and portrayals that lay bare our human frailty in new and uncompromising ways.

We hope that you, the reader, will feel you have been taken on an interesting journey along the contours of this fascinating subject. Certainly, as editors and researchers, it has been a thought-provoking, rich process for us to gather this anthology and a privilege to engage with the multidisciplinary writers who have contributed. We hope these chapters will encourage scholars, thinkers, artists and professionals in other disciplines too to consider loneliness in their own investigations and to explore the potential for either interconnectivity or alienation of our fellow human beings in the artefacts, products, interventions and processes we create.

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Inter and intrapersonal loneliness



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Loneliness

An overview

Philip S. Morrison and Rebekah Smith

Introduction

Humans are inherently social beings who possess a fundamental need to belong, and when they fail to satisfy this need, loneliness occurs. If sustained, loneliness can have severe consequences for mental and physical health as well as undermine community functioning and social inclusion (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006) p. 711. As Dahlberg has reminded us,

To be involuntarily lonely and not belonging to anyone or anything is to lack participation in the world. . . . Loneliness can disappear with a sense of belonging.

(Dahlberg, 2007, p. 195)

There is, therefore, a strong *subjective* dimension to loneliness. It is not just being alone, but feeling alone, emotionally. More bluntly, loneliness is being alone and not liking it (Rogers, 1961).

The intense interest in loneliness in the early decades of the 21st century appears to stem from an uncomfortable feeling that its incidence might be increasing – from being a relatively rare condition in the past to being more pervasive and widespread – concentrated among the young and the old, the less educated and those on lower incomes. However, the origins of the current wave of interest in loneliness are probably several: the fragmentation of the family, the growing number living alone, a rising proportion of elderly, much higher levels of female labour force participation and the proliferation of the Internet both at work and at home.

While the popular press continues to advance the thesis of an increasing lonely society, the scientific community is in far less agreement, partly due to the difficulty in measuring a stigmatised condition which only individuals can report but also because the longitudinal studies required to monitor trends are sparse.¹

Outline

As is the case for many concepts in social science, loneliness is difficult to define, and yet the definition is crucial in order to ascertain its presence, intensity and