# The history of loneliness: what we know so far

An evidence-based resource for newcomers to the field

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## Summary


- Loneliness is a complex and embedded problem requiring a plurality of disciplinary perspectives and methodologies to understand and address. Historians of loneliness are uniquely placed to contribute evidence and insight to policymaking, third sector work, and research in non-humanities fields.
- Our work suggests that framing loneliness as an ‘epidemic’ or ‘crisis’ is misleading, with significant negative implications for research and intervention. A longer temporal lens allows us to ask more useful questions about what loneliness is, where it comes from, and how it works.
- By excavating, interpreting, and contextualising evidence such as correspondence, medical records, literary texts, paintings, and photography, historical research allows us to understand how people in the past recognised, articulated, and responded to loneliness.
- In so doing, it shows how and why complicated parts of the picture – such as the organisation of our social lives, processes and mechanisms of exclusion and inequality, and the medical, political, and cultural meanings we attach to loneliness in the present – are the way they are.
- Historical practice further evidences loneliness as a deep historical and structural phenomenon, with multiple causes, expressions, and iterations. It demands – and can help underpin – a collective movement beyond superficial and individualised explanations and solutions.
- As a vibrant and vital component of wider systems of knowledge on loneliness, historical research and expertise offers a rigorous methodological and theoretical approach capable of, and in many cases best suited for, addressing significant gaps in evidence and understanding.
- Readers interested in historical perspectives on loneliness can and should go further than the present document. It assembles a series of case studies synthesising the work of its authors, and aims to provide a useful introduction to the field as it stands; it is not, however, intended to be an end in itself, but a doorway to the body of work it condenses. It is in this body of work, and in dialogue and collaboration with historians of loneliness themselves, that readers will find the most value.

## Introduction

The history of loneliness is a growing field of study, broadly situated across social, economic, and cultural history, literary and philosophical studies, the history of the emotions, histories of medicine, and histories of the psy- and social sciences. This is a field with vast potential to nuance and inform policymaking and scholarship on loneliness in the present day. However, medical, social, and health research on loneliness has been slow to adopt its insights, a problem due in small part to how historians position and communicate our research and expertise.[1] This document is an attempt by a significant section of the field to articulate what, precisely, historical work on loneliness can offer; to present our research, here if not elsewhere, in a consciously instrumental way; and to make an overture to loneliness policymakers and researchers outside of the discipline of history to engage more closely with our findings and expertise.

While loneliness had not been a complete omission in earlier historical scholarship, there has been a sharp increase in research on the subject over the last decade. Intellectually and politically, this has been a response to the heightened visibility of loneliness as a social and medical problem, and to an accompanying language of crisis which situates the present as a uniquely lonely time. It has also taken inspiration from historically-framed work by writers in other disciplines, such as Robert Putnam and Ben Lazare Mijuskovic; from K.D.M. Snell's agenda-setting call for the overdue study of loneliness by academic historians; and from conceptually rich research on loneliness in the humanities and social sciences which raises pressing questions of temporality, context, and genealogy.[2] The field so far has been sustained by a number of major publications and collections: *Cultures of Solitude*, edited by Ina Bergmann and Stefan Hippler; Fay Bound Alberti's *A Biography of Loneliness*; David Vincent's *A History of Solitude*; *The Routledge History of Loneliness*, edited by Katie Barclay, Elaine Chalus, and Deborah Simonton; a special issue of *Critical Quarterly* edited by James Morland, Akshi Singh, and Charlie Williams; and a special issue of *New Formations* edited by Jess Cotton. A Palgrave volume edited by Hannah Yip and Thomas Clifton, *Writing Early Modern Loneliness*, is currently in press.[3]

In tandem with a spate of articles and chapters in other places, and moving forward in a number of exciting projects and collaborations, this literature explores and evidences a multiplicity of rich and complex histories. As work develops illuminating past strategies of prevention and alleviation, community and familial structures, systems of support or ostracism, and types, forms, and conceptualisations of loneliness, there is an increasing wealth of research findings with clear and extensive implications for loneliness now. Historical practice, we contend, can inform present- and future-facing research and policy in important ways. In the most straightforward sense, history is the best tool we have for understanding precisely where the biggest threats to human health and happiness come from. Complex questions, such as how loneliness is produced by particular contexts, processes, or inequalities, require historical methodologies to adequately answer. As much of the work below attests, historical

sources – and the historians who use their knowledge and training to interpret them – can also disrupt collective problems with imagination, particularly the sense that specific states of affairs (such as increased isolation in old age) are natural or inevitable. In the words of Robert Chapman, a philosopher who makes significant use of historical methodologies, history 'can help us imagine new worlds. Perhaps more rarely, it can help us see how to bring these worlds into being.'[4] As the COVID-19 pandemic introduced novel phenomena of mass isolation, distance, and grief, historical thinking can also help us understand how collective relationships with loneliness and solitude played out.[5]

This resource is the product of a collaboration between seventeen experts in the histories of loneliness and solitude, working across a wide thematic, geographical, and temporal scope. Authors contributed short passages which condensed findings from their research; these were arranged and edited by the lead author in the first instance, and then by the team as a whole. The document is divided into four case studies, each of which draws together arguments, insights, and evidence from multiple scholars. By no means exhaustive, it stands as a partial snapshot of some of the work which has been done, or is in the process of being conducted. It is hoped by the authors that there will be scope to significantly update the document as the field evolves.

Our case studies, each chosen to reflect the contributions and expertise of the authors, and to connect specifically with live concerns in loneliness research and policy now, are as follows. The first, Crisis, addresses a key insight of the field as a whole: that framing or approaching loneliness as a distinctly modern ailment, a pathology of the present, or a defining feature of modernity and its expressions, is a grave misunderstanding with considerable repercussions for how the problem is conceptualised and acted upon. The second case study, Chronology, offers an alternative understanding, tracing a brief overview of the presence, use and meanings of loneliness over time, and reflecting on the historical contingency of the experience and its articulation. The third, Contexts and Complexities, demonstrates the capacity for historical research to build deep and rich contextual pictures of loneliness in relation to culture, gender, and work, helping make sense of some of the biggest questions in loneliness studies today. Finally, our fourth case study, Inequalities and the Life Course, showcases a historical approach towards unpicking how loneliness is – and has been – unevenly imposed by ethical and structural failures in relation to age, disability, and class and gender exploitation. In the process, it reflects on how particular transitions – such as becoming a mother, or going to university – throw our relationships or our embeddedness in communities into a heightened state of contention. We close the document by drawing out a series of implications for ongoing work, and an invitation to the reader to engage more closely with the history of loneliness, and with the research and practice of scholars working in this area. This piece of work has always been intended as the beginning of what we hope will be many generative conversations, putting the past squarely in dialogue with present – and future – knowledge and action on loneliness as a social, political, and historical problem.

## Case Study One: Crisis

Political, media, academic, and public health representations of loneliness consistently mobilise a language of 'epidemic' or 'crisis', usually to draw attention to the urgency of the problem. This frames loneliness either as a distinct problem of the present, or in an unprecedented state of breadth or severity for short-term political, cultural, or technological reasons.[6] This way of thinking, however, is at least a century old, if not older. Commentators in the 1950s and 1960s wrote about a 'modern scourge', a 'dark tuberculosis of the spirit' that had settled over the land.[7] If past generations also thought about loneliness in this way, and have been doing so more or less consistently for a long time, this necessarily stretches our definition of what 'crisis' means. Far more than a concern with historical accuracy, this extreme short-termism actively constrains how we understand and approach loneliness in the present. Organisations, institutions, policymakers and researchers that internalise this logic of crisis are likely to blame the wrong phenomena, ask the wrong questions, and arrive at the wrong answers, undermining effective responses to a significant cause of suffering and harm.

Our historical research explicitly contests this narrow, presentist view, but it also shows some of the contexts and processes it stems from. With roots in dramatic twentieth-century 'uncoverings' of hitherto hidden loneliness in print journalism, a tendency to think of loneliness as existing in a state of crisis has been further dependent on technologies of quantification borrowed from psychiatric diagnosis.[8] This is exemplified in the much-used UCLA Loneliness Scale, which requires respondents to allocate themselves into one of four boxes, corresponding to how often they feel lonely: 'often', 'sometimes', 'rarely', and 'never'.[9] Technologies of measurement have stoked a misleading sense of crisis for two reasons. First, commentators have tended to conflate the first two or three categories, generating headlines of national social breakdown. Second, they direct attention away from complex strategies for managing social relations that cannot be ranked in a simple arithmetical order. There is no inherent reason why loneliness, as with any emotional state, should increase in step changes over a lifetime, however they are labelled and by whom. Nor, at a more granular level, does loneliness necessarily progress on a single scale of intensity. Most experiences of loneliness are not 'more' or 'less' than, but different from others.[10]

What might seem to be a rise in experiences of loneliness, therefore, might also be an artefact of how we create and value different kinds of evidence. We should beware of any tendency to assume that such findings and their seeming quantitative precision necessarily herald 'new' predicaments. Historical research shows the development of far older qualitative literatures on loneliness and isolation, addressing – for example – work on communities in Wales and Western Ireland, which pointed to the adverse isolating consequences for the remnant elderly of nineteenth- and twentieth-century out-migration among the young.[11]

Like 'romantic love', 'affective individualism', 'civilising behaviour', 'the decline of community', and many other supposedly modern phenomena, it is a mistake to assume that loneliness is distinctive to our own comparatively recent history. We

cannot know, to begin with, how acute modern experiences of loneliness are in historical perspective. Some indicators such as the rise of living alone, the decline of fertility in western societies, the growth of LAT ('living apart together') relationships, late marriage ages, the rise of divorce rates, rapid urbanisation, the incidence of international migration and refugee cultural displacement, and extended life expectancies often in states of widowhood, may suggest to some commentators a relative severity of loneliness. Many forms of modernism in visual and literary art highlight personal isolation, from Edvard Munch to Edward Hopper, from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Jean Rhys, and folk and popular music is replete with similar examples, particularly in relation to romantic loneliness. The corollaries of such seeming trends – whether demographic/migratory or expressively cultural – are still being ascertained, but they do not necessarily point to intensified loneliness. The break-up of lonely, uncommunicative, or suppressive marriages may be a liberation from marital loneliness and isolation; the rise of urban single-woman households points to rising economic participation rates; and urbanisation can extricate many from rural isolation, particularly when cities offer safer havens and communities of belonging for queer people or people of colour.[12]

Likewise, we should be wary of assuming that a greater reliance on - and immersion in - social media is itself a cause of loneliness and social fragmentation. This is another area where historical enquiry suggests that we have been there before. Recent histories allow us to place anxieties over loneliness and technological innovation in historical perspective, and help us think through some of their ambivalences and complexities. At the same time as some mid-twentieth-century psychologists were voicing concerns over loneliness and radio addiction, an anti-loneliness charity, the Wireless for the Bedridden Society (now Wavelength), were gifting radios to elderly, disabled, and chronically ill people confined to their beds.[13]

Specifically in the form of letter-writing and an effective postal service, technology has long played a role in easing loneliness and enhancing sociability. The Republic of Letters, which emerged between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enabled those interested in science, medicine, and philosophy to establish an intellectual network across the globe.[14] The relationships that emerged out of shared intellectual interests could result in meaningful (if distant) friendships, and connect extended family members more closely. We see this in the epistolary records of the clergy in the seventeenth century, the diarist Ralph Josselin being a prominent example.[15]

Indeed, expressing suffering through writing has a distinct history as a therapeutic act. In the eighteenth century, medical consultation by letter was popular with wealthy patients, offering them access to the best physicians who might have lived at a distance. Those who suffered from the isolation that accompanied chronic pain and illness sometimes became regular correspondents of physicians, or even developed long-term friendships.[16] There are parallels here with the use of social media to build virtual communities centred on specific identities, illness, and experiences of disability. Technology does not always fragment society, but can enhance connectivity and

sociability.[17] Eighteenth-century letters, in which authors were keenly aware of writing as a form of self-fashioning, are historical sources which can offer considerable insights into healthy uses of technology as a tool of community building and personal support.

In addition to missing these important complexities, an epidemic or crisis narrative on loneliness has a series of stifling effects. To begin with, it fails to differentiate or historicise the factors leading to the feelings and states that we label in this way. Envisaging loneliness as a predominantly modern and acute state can overlook the multiplicity of causes and their complexities, and obscure salient political contexts, such as disinvestment in public infrastructure and social welfare.[18] In the process, it narrows the argument to debate about the boundaries of suffering, confusing profoundly damaging experiences with much more general disjunctions in social interactions that are commonplace in a complex modern society. It also implicitly denies lonely people the possession of agency, structured into strategies over time.

The particular use of the word 'epidemic' to describe loneliness retains the temporal urgency of 'crisis', while further steeping the experience in medical metaphor.[19] This directs attention to possible pharmaceutical ‘cures’ for loneliness. In taking up the language of emotional and medical contagion, it also pathologises those who are marginalised from social life, rather than seeing loneliness as a failure of politics and community. Framing loneliness as an epidemic fails to place this experience in a long unfolding history of deindustrialisation and welfare, driving medical research rather than community and psychosocial provision. In post-war Britain, psychoanalysts and general practitioners worked together to think about how ‘therapeutic communities’ might alleviate loneliness.[20] The writer John Berger observes how the fraternal recognition of the doctor – an imaginative response that is stripped in neoliberal medical frameworks – was particularly essential in areas that had undergone processes of deindustrialisation where a general sense of uprootedness – or collective unbelonging – was experienced individually as loneliness. Berger connects a lack of belief in the future to ‘the essence of loneliness’; and argues that this belief is crucial to driving a sense that it is worth investing in community.[21]

Despite a collective aversion to the language of crisis, the authors are not opposed to ideas of – and indeed are directly engaged in reckoning with – historical change. We resist the framing of loneliness as a crisis or epidemic because of what it is (insufficiently evidenced) and what it does (shift the conversation to a temporal register which is simultaneously misguided and directly damaging), but our call for historical perspective should not be misread as an attempt at de-escalation or naturalisation. To be clear, loneliness is a pressing and significant problem, and it may even be getting worse. Writing and thinking about loneliness in terms of crisis has become a self-perpetuating script, but it doesn’t come from nowhere. Every historical moment has a set of challenges which, by definition, seem of particular singularity and weight. Ours are no different: ‘austerity’, the ‘cost of living’ crisis, the gig economy, and COVID-19, each overlaying and intensifying longer histories of class and gender exploitation,

ableism, colonialism, and heteronormativity, and long-term structures of experience, socialisation, and community. There is a direct need to show how loneliness is produced and experienced in the deep and complex historical context of the immediate present, but it is unnecessary and unhelpful to set these pressing questions in tension with an imagined and idealised past.

## Case Study Two: Chronology

Present-day work on loneliness often makes historical claims about how long it has been a problem, or how long particular associations and meanings (i.e. with urban living, modernity, shame, or physical health outcomes) have been made. At present, such claims carry varying degrees of accuracy, and would be better guided by historical expertise grounded in rigorous research methodologies. While the general trend has been to underestimate considerably the historical scope of loneliness as an experience, problem, and idea, ahistorical arguments which assert it as a problem of human existence from time immemorial also miss important changes in how it has been named, understood, produced, and experienced, even over short temporal scales. While anything like a definitive history of loneliness is considerably beyond this resource, the authors thought it useful to assemble some collective thoughts on the evolution of the term, its antecedents and changing meanings.

Even before the word 'loneliness' came into common use, writers in the early modern period (1500–1700) found ways to articulate and express painful or difficult experiences of being alone. Given that religion – predominantly, the Christian faith – was one of the most important features of life in early modern Europe, much of these writings are infused with biblical references. '[W]ho careless seeks to live alone?' asked Henry Lok, one of the most productive writers of devotional poetry in the late sixteenth century. Lok claimed that '[t]he solitary man unhappy is' and that '[h]e in society reposeth bliss / Whose maker great … Ordain'd a means he might not live alone'. With a clear reference to Genesis 2:18, his verses argued that to be alone was to be unhappy (i.e. lonely), and that God had ensured the bliss of mankind by creating society.[22]

Two of the most remarkable English-language works of the early modern period – Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and John Bunyan's hugely influential *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) – repeatedly engaged with issues relating to what we would now term loneliness. Their works remind us how changes in terminology can still echo a perpetual and recognisable set of problems, albeit ones that need to be accurately defined and characterised for respective contexts and periods. Written during Bunyan's imprisonment, and as he bore spiritual burdens so intense as to cause the lonely reflection that he would sink into hell, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an unparalleled expression of lonesome self-containment and vulnerability.[23] As one of the most widely read books of the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries, perhaps the most widely owned and read English-language book beyond The Bible, its spiritual and personal messages clearly had vast resonance.

Alongside artefacts, letters, diaries, and visual culture, literary sources offer some of the best opportunities we have for understanding early modern feelings and understandings of loneliness.[24] As an emotion of absence, loneliness is often described in conjunction with other emotions and is defined by contrasts and what it is not. In eighteenth-century poetry, specific words are repeated as echoes to replicate the continual cycles of loneliness experienced in moments of grief and mourning.[25] Poetry became a literary space to explore feelings of loneliness, leading them to be amplified and echoed back either within the rhymes and rhythms of the poem itself or with the future potential reader. Loneliness is combined with other negative emotions (a 'lonely anguish' for example), to try and define this feeling of absence. Loneliness is, paradoxically, not a lonely emotion, and poetry of the past can be useful in helping define contemporary feelings of loneliness.[26] These texts are also examples of the sharing of loneliness creating a community in and of itself: in encountering these accounts of loneliness, readers are reminded that they are not alone in their experiences.

By the early nineteenth century, loneliness was increasingly legible in routine correspondences, as people reported many of the feelings and states that we associate with the experience and, importantly, linked it to their mental and physical health. At a time when people were regularly required to travel for training, work, and war, with few or slow opportunities to stay in contact with family, familial homes, and friends, they recorded feeling socially isolated, alienated, vulnerable, and anxious, yearning for the comfort and security of familiar places and faces, or to forge these links in the new places where they were required to reside. These experiences recur in emigrants' letters, or in pauper letters to parishes or unions of legal settlement under the welfare system of England and Wales in the three centuries before 1948, and were by no means alien to the countless diarists, letter writers, and novelists of the seventeenth century onwards. Feelings of loneliness could also be linked to bereavement, or to picaresque experiences of migration and community displacement.[27]

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the word 'lonely' gathered increasing connotations of neuroticism and a lack of meaningful connection with other people.[28] One of the biggest shifts in how we attach meaning to loneliness accompanied the growth of medical and social scientific interest in the problem, taking place across a number of disciplines in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From something that was primarily publicly discussed in philosophy, literature, journalism, and poetry – in short, in the arts and humanities – loneliness became a preoccupation, albeit at times an implicit one, in sociologies of urban living, family and kinship, or changing structures of 'community'; in various literatures on ageing, suicide, migration, gender roles, and adverse childhood experience; and in almost all research into mental illness, in some form. While much important work on loneliness has taken place under other rubrics, we can chart the emergence and proliferation of a dedicated Anglophone literature across the mid-late twentieth century. Foundational essays by the psychoanalysts Gregory Zilboorg (1938) and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959) were

followed by 64 new publications in the 1960s, around 170 in the 1970s, and almost 650 more between 1980 and 1996.[29] As Mathew Thomson has explored, the diffusion of social scientific concepts and languages into how we imagine, narrate, and fashion our selves, relationships, and lives has had far-reaching consequences for how they are actively lived, and this is true of our experiences and understandings of loneliness.[30]

Understanding how knowledge of loneliness has been created over time – for example, in a closer identification between loneliness and neuroticism – can also help unpick complex experiential and theoretical entanglements between loneliness and other processes, states, or emotions. Loneliness is a stigmatised experience with a long and complex relationship with shame, particularly in its enduring representation as a matter of personal failure.[31] This can be traced, at least in part, to Enlightenment assumptions that progress in all its aspects was founded on forms of personal interaction that were both feasible and necessary in a well-founded society. Loneliness was a pathology generated either by a wilful withdrawal from company or by a misguided strategy of living, including religious extremism and extreme preoccupation with private endeavours, including scholarly enquiry. As loneliness gathered momentum as an object of study in the psy sciences, shaming associations with selfishness, hostility, and 'unlikeability' can also be followed back to how psychologists and psychiatrists – like Zilboorg and Fromm-Reichmann – described its behavioural consequences and causative pathways.[32]

Keeping, for the moment, a focus on shame, historical work shows how, far from being inevitable, the emotional attachments we have to loneliness are framed by the meanings that it carries, and that these do not always map cleanly onto chronological time. We live and make sense of our emotions in cultural worlds which are deeply historically embedded. Even when past representations of loneliness seem distant from our own, they are an inextricable part of a process which frames and informs the present, and can surface and recur in unexpected ways. Research on only children in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries demonstrates the complex association between loneliness, shame, 'expert knowledge', and lived experience. Close interrogation of guidance and comments directed towards the growing numbers of couples who chose to limit their families to one child, and the testimonies of only children themselves, reveals insights on loneliness otherwise difficult to come by. Writers of contemporary child-rearing manuals increasingly warned readers that only children were uniquely lonely, and therefore that to stop at one child was to cause suffering that could be avoided by having a larger family – which, incidentally, also served the demographic 'needs' of the country. These sentiments were reflected more widely in mid-twentieth century views on ideal family size. Only children, writing or speaking as adults between 1922 and 1993, appeared to re-evaluate whether they had suffered from loneliness in childhood, having since learned that only children were supposed to be lonely, and that there was something wrong with them for being unperturbed by solitude as children.[33]

Alongside carrying considerable implications for how we deal with historical memory, when everything is necessarily filtered through subsequent knowledge and experience, this shows how subjective and situational loneliness can be. Some only children were isolated in childhood, but did not feel lonely because they were content in their own company (an experience some went on to second-guess in the face of repeated assumptions that only children were inevitably lonely, and therefore to be pitied, or even feared). Some were isolated and did feel lonely, but this was alleviated when they visited family or went to school; others still could not be considered isolated by any measure. Individual personalities, parental attitudes, family circumstances, social class, and gender determined whether an individual – only child or otherwise – experienced loneliness at any given point.[34] The complicated and ambiguous ways that only children used the word, in addition, gives us considerable pause in assuming that changes in meaning and language are total or move at an equal pace. Rather than reproducing an almost wholly negative set of meanings, only children sometimes wrote and spoke about loneliness in a more neutral or ambivalent way, recalling forms of use common a century or more earlier. While historical research on loneliness can tell us much about the present, this illustrates some of the pitfalls of reaching back into the past for supposedly analogous experiences to the modern day. When combing ego-documents for references to being 'lonely', it is important to ascertain and contextualise the sense in which the word was intended.

This dimension of historical practice and expertise – the imperative to always historicise, to approach everything in its contingent and loaded cultural, political, and social context – is a vital part of how we interpret knowledge of the past into knowledge of the present. It also serves as a useful reminder that loneliness is just as inflected by time and space here and now as it was half a millennium ago.

**Case Study Three: Contexts and Complexities**

At a moment where scholarship and policymaking on loneliness is increasingly characterised by the acknowledgement of complexity and a heightened attentiveness to context, historical expertise has a critical role to play. In demonstrating how encultured experiences and understandings of loneliness develop and change, historians have much to offer conversations on loneliness in and across diverse cultural contexts. Work on loneliness which assumes a relatively stable category across very different places with very different histories frequently struggles to capture the culturally-specific valence that shapes how it is experienced and valued. While almost every language has a word or two that can usefully stand in for – and echo much of the intention of - the English term 'loneliness', these are necessarily framed and freighted in unique and specific ways, with considerable consequences for how it is expressed and discussed.[35]

A growing anthropological literature on loneliness – often, in the past, eclipsed by discussion of the loneliness of anthropologists – is in the process of setting out a number of pertinent questions and agendas, many of which have substantial historical

components.[36] Comparative psychology and cross-cultural policy work frequently adopts quasi-historical methodologies to tell complex stories about the circumstances in which people become lonely, implicating long historical processes with extensive cultural and material drivers and consequences. Every cultural context, whether broadly or closely defined, has been moulded by long histories with direct bearings on how loneliness is produced and experienced: community erosion, dissolution of class identity, industrialisation, deindustrialisation, declining trust in government, resurgences in nationalism, tensions between individualism and community, extensive migration and mobility of refugees, serious social trauma and collective loss, and rising rates of related public health challenges such as addiction or mental ill-health, to name a few.[37] While these are visible and interpretable to the sociologist or the ethnographer, historical methodologies can trace, for example, the deep cultural lineage of individualism, in ways that tell highly pertinent stories about the culturally contingent structure of contemporary social, relational, and political life.[38]

In assembling detailed accounts of past microcultures, historians of loneliness in specific labouring or professional contexts also have much to offer contemporary conversations on loneliness and work, which have so far been slow to recognise how it can occur as a form of occupational health problem. The organisation and environment of some professions, and the ways that class, gender, hierarchy, distance, and power play out within them, are important levers for understanding loneliness as a past and present phenomenon. For example, we can see a glimpse of academic loneliness in the letters of the vice-president of Magdalen College, Oxford, Thomas Smith, in the 1680s. Smith wrote to several close friends about feeling bereft of good company and conversation, despite being among a community of fellow scholars.[39]

Over a century later, the experiences of British navy officers during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) reveals that extended separation from family and personal emotional support systems, as well as a leadership structure that was increasingly rigid and hierarchical, set men in leadership positions apart professionally, socially, and psychologically from their subordinates. These men suffered from personal and professional loneliness; though overlapping, both were framed by vocation. Personal loneliness was social and emotional, an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of separation from home and family due to active service. It was also an acknowledged concomitant of leadership, the result of an invisible barrier of status that precluded the easy intimacy of the midshipmans' and lower officers' messes from being readily replicated at a captain's or admiral's table. Professional loneliness, by comparison, was circumstantial. It tended to result from a breakdown or lapse in communication with superiors that left the officer at sea feeling frustrated, isolated, under- or un-appreciated, and sometimes even abandoned. Perhaps counter-intuitively, loneliness was a vocational hazard that increased with rank. It also had a complex relationship with boredom and routine, as repetitive tasks encouraged introspection and failed to provide the engagement in work which could have held loneliness at bay.[40]

This is also rich ground for thinking across temporalities on loneliness as a problem of different and overlapping kinds of distance, a point underscored in the private writing of lonely – and homesick – young men in the same century. Moving away from home for work, young men worried in their diaries about their feelings of loneliness and the damage this might cause their minds and bodies in the unfamiliar surroundings they were encountering. They soothed themselves with nostalgia for their parental homes, with objects they took with them, and with sociability. Even so, the latter caused them anxiety since young men were meant to follow productive pursuits to achieve professional respectability.[41] The requirement to go out into the world to make something of themselves – and to do so in a particular way – uprooted young men from familiar systems of support. At the same time, it fostered notions of masculine independence and self-resilience which compromised their ability to process and express feelings of loneliness without inadequacy.

At the time of writing in early 2024, men's – and particularly young men's – loneliness is subject to heightened public contention and debate. A recent *Guardian* piece by Joseph Earp explored a loneliness which Earp had 'rarely tried to put into words'; a loneliness which he saw 'most commonly in the faces of the men' he knew.[42] In an increasing problem for loneliness scholarship more broadly, good faith concern over men's loneliness and mental health has shared considerable space – and justification – with exploitative, bad faith readings, which diagnose similar symptoms but lay them at the door of gains made by feminist (and, increasingly, other liberational) movements over the last sixty or seventy years.[43] A historical framing of these concerns demonstrates the longevity of men's experiences of loneliness, resisting confected and frequently malevolent arguments which pose them as a malady of lost power. In conversation with histories of masculinity, histories of men's loneliness ask instead how members of comparatively privileged social groups can often become lonely.

While our world today is much better connected by communication and transport, there are still many people whose work takes them away from family and personal support networks for extended periods of time, and hierarchical structures of leadership also persist. Work has often been described as an antidote to loneliness, for example in postwar and second-wave feminist activism, and unemployment (or unremunerated labour in the home) has received far more attention as a risk factor. Historical research, however, demands a greater attentiveness to the professional contexts and practices that people become lonely in (and through). This might entail a better understanding of how broader processes of exclusion and exploitation play out in specific workplaces; a closer interrogation of particularly – and historically – isolating labour; and an exploration of how changing patterns of work, whether the gig economy or other kinds of precarious labour, isolate the people caught up in them.[44] The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion wrote about loneliness as a kind of 'psychic disinheritance'; a form of social unbelonging that is intimately related to the history of labour and which requires psychosocial solutions.[45] Pushing back against the assumption that work necessarily spelled a route out of isolation for women in the twentieth century, Sheila Rowbotham used the example of the cleaner labouring alone in a deserted office building in the

early hours of the morning.[46] For the women arriving at their desks later in the day, the sociability of the canteen and the water-dispenser might well have been a protective factor; but this was contingent on lower status (and lower class) work which offered no such affordances.

In showing how loneliness has been experienced and interpreted across diverse temporal and contextual scales, historical research also encompasses a significant call for sustained attentiveness to complexity: whether in the way we approach loneliness as an object of knowledge or a category of experience; attempt to unravel the myriad environments and life stories that influence when, how and where different people become lonely; or comprehend a convoluted, heterogeneous, and subjective set of feelings. Historicising loneliness requires an ease with multiplicity, which frequently runs counter to imperatives to measure or define. It relies on work with corpuses of evidence, such as personal letters and reflections, or literary, theological, and philosophical sources, which encourage a rich textual engagement with what loneliness might mean in a very specific time and place.

## Case Study Four: Inequality and the Life Course

A considerable proportion of present-day work on loneliness is engaged in understanding how it intersects with problems of exclusion, inequality, and social and health justice, or maps onto experiences of the built environment at different stages of the life course.[47] Historical research shows that these intersections are not new; they have past iterations, which reward careful study, but also distinct histories, in the sense that historical practice can demonstrate both where they came from, and how the ideas we use to think about them developed. In thinking critically and expansively about context, history centres loneliness as embedded and contingent, an experience that tells us something important about the environments, circumstances, life histories, and power relationships in which it takes place.

In particular, the work of the authors has revolved around questions of gender, class, disability, belonging, and space, asking how experiences of loneliness have taken place in, and been coloured by, particular sets of social and cultural expectations, living conditions, economic and professional realities, and isolating and transitional phases of life. These have played – and continue to play – out in how loneliness is produced and sustained, but also govern who is able to access healthy experiences of solitude. If we think of solitude as always in a complex series of negotiations with loneliness, both theoretically and experientially, it is – at least sometimes – a viable antidote, transforming feelings of isolation and failure into a more pleasant and restorative accommodation with aloneness. Histories of solitude, however, demonstrate that this emotionally and psychologically significant experience has frequently been a marker of social power and status. For example, access to solitude has always been gendered, with women's relationship with solitude historically shaped by relationships, resources, and patriarchal discourses on their capacities and caring responsibilities. Women with a marked preference for solitude have often been placed

under (contingent and varying) degrees of social suspicion, and at times were assumed to be mad.[48] The spectre of the 'old cat lady' very much haunts the present day, and – in throwing up barriers between single women and the wider communities and networks they may want to sometimes make use of – actively works against the possibility of a solitary life without loneliness.[49] Conversely, once loneliness is recognised as a common condition, and with the right communal provisions, solitariness can be a form of solidarity.[50]

Because our societies are in the main not arranged for people to live – and particularly grow old – alone without having to feel lonely, a problem compounded by all kinds of social and health inequalities, romantic relationships have taken on a heightened burden in terms of preventing or dispelling loneliness. This is not a burden they can adequately contain, and lifelong partnership is a flawed answer to complex political questions about kinship and relational health. Rarely is this more evident than in historical work on how heterosexual marriage and motherhood have seen many women isolated in the home. Particularly for mothers, the loneliness of partial, conditional, or impaired participation in social or professional life has been accompanied – and intensified by – a corresponding inability to carve out truly solitary time away from children.

That mothers are often lonely but rarely fully alone allows us to unsettle assumptions that loneliness is predicated on a dearth of company, connectedness, and purpose. Historical experiences of loneliness in motherhood are an ideal point from which to look outwards, taking in the political processes, institutions, and ideologies which engender – and, indeed, gender – feelings of loneliness and alienation. These are very much live concerns, with the concept of matresence gaining considerable traction among scholars, activists, and artists determined to raise awareness of the radical impact that pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing has upon women and their bodies.[51] A process demanding monumental physical, psychological, and social transition, matrescence demonstrates how loneliness can be provoked by change; to identities, bodies, routines, networks, and relationships. At the centre of these creative and scholarly explorations is evidence that representation matters to mothers; feeling seen, heard – and, better still, understood and supported – mitigates feelings of isolation. Mothers in the present are routinely isolated from important histories of maternal loneliness, and historical research can help us think through where these enduring inequalities come from and how they might be resisted or rectified.

While loneliness in motherhood and marriage has been a particular preoccupation of feminist thought in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, there is also evidence that they could be particularly isolating for women in the early modern period. When the gentlewoman Alice Thornton married in 1651, she described how marriage had placed her in a situation 'soe remote from all my owne relations and freinds' that she feared 'I might be in a suffering condittion for the want of theire advice and assistance'.[52] Many newly married women felt an acute sense of loss over the friendships of their youth, which could make marriage 'a restrictive and at times lonely experience for

those whose married homes were country houses far from their family or other female company'.[53]

The predicaments of labouring-class or artisan women are much less well documented, though they also tended to move upon marriage to their husbands' locations. Indeed, under the English and Welsh settlement and poor laws all women took their husbands' legal parish settlements (where they were entitled to welfare) upon marriage in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, even though they had often never been there. As a married couple, they could (and frequently did) live elsewhere, yet legally they were tied for welfare purposes and entitlement to the husband's parish of settlement. Countless women found themselves removed (or having to move) to such places if they required poor relief, whether as married persons or deserted or widowed women. It would often be a strange and unknown parish to them, and a place that resented their sudden imposition upon its poor rates.[54] Comparable legal situations affecting married or widowed women existed in many north European countries, creating distinct political and legislative contexts for ostracism, local xenophobia, and loneliness over long periods of time.

Where generations of feminists, particularly after 1945, made loneliness in the home a central spur of their critique of – and organising around – contemporary gender relations, we can see a particularly rich set of histories, many of which carry important lessons for the present. In the immediate post-war period, the assertion that women were suffering *as women* was tangled through an earlier set of anxieties at the intersections of social science, psychiatry, and town and city planning.[55] Would the relative physical comfort of the newly developed suburban landscape offset the relative social atomisation of these homes, into which new families were encouraged to move? Would high-rise flats enable much-desired privacy, or breed fragmentation or frustration?

In collaborating on a political and environmental critique of married women's loneliness which emphasised patriarchal exploitation and narrowed or constrained citizenship in particular urban and suburban post-war spaces, feminist doctors, researchers and reformers laid vital ground for the imagining – and realisation – of collective solutions.[56] The emergence of 'therapeutic communities', affordable housing, more amenable welfare services, the expansion of the arts, political organising, and public resources were essential to assuage feelings of loneliness. Through the organisation of the 'small groups' of the women's liberation movement, facilitated by low rent and local councils, women began to feel less lonely – to recognise the 'desperate loneliness' of domesticity as a common condition – and to use their new sense of sociality to create communal resources that would enable others to feel less atomised at a moment when the welfare state was beginning to erode.[57]

If the emotional lives of young families and new mothers were subject to increased social scientific interest after the Second World War, in part because of their implications for urban design, then researchers also looked across to university students on the newly developed campuses that emerged during the 1960s.[58] While

these two constituencies – new families and university students – might not be seen to share much ground, they both bore the promise of the future and were the targets of architectural innovation. University accommodation blocks took their place on these 'utopian' new campuses, replete with architectural flairs that were markers of aspirational modernity. Just as new mothers highlighted the implications of high-rise living for emotional intimacy, so too did students living in forward-looking university accommodation in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom took to student newspapers to air their complaints at the anti-social design of their campus blocks, which, they said, did little to encourage connection and community.[59] Such insights are a reminder of two challenges: first, that environmental design can divide when it aims to unite – building design cannot speak to the emotional experience of the people within its walls; second, that loneliness can arise most painfully around the hinterlands of confected social communities.

Fay Bound Alberti has argued that the 'emotional cluster' of loneliness is recast at particular 'pinch-points' of the life course.[60] The transitional states of university study and early motherhood highlight the ways that loneliness can spring from moments of personal transformation, and can also occur when people have the least opportunity to be alone. Just as loneliness is gendered and culturally shaped, it can also be situational and linked to liminal times in people's lives.[61] We have to understand, however, that this is not a historical constant, but directly tied to the ways that we structure, support, and value different experiences and phases of the life-cycle. While much research on loneliness over the past century has been organised around the problems of older adults, historical research suggests that loneliness in old age is neither natural nor inevitable. Structures of familial and communal life in early modern England, for instance, meant that many older people 'remained socially integrated and valuable'.[62] Countering misleading narratives of historical progress, studies of past responses to loneliness suggest that families and communities made use of sophisticated and effective practices to alleviate social alienation, such as mourning rituals to help with grieving, creating family recipe books to ease anticipatory grief, or nurturing ill people by preparing special meals.[63]

We might usefully reflect, then, on how old age is culturally and socially positioned in the present, and where loneliness is in that picture. Growing older does create possibilities for loneliness to occur: in grief, or in reduced health, networks, mobilities, and feelings of contribution and value; but these are a reflection on societies which neglect to compensate. Widespread cultural representations of loneliness among older adults provide some useful functions, but they can also naturalise the experience as something to be expected and managed, not designed out. How a group is depicted is a question of considerable pertinence, and the consequences are not always foreseeable. In the 1960s, depictions of lonely, bored, depressed, and anxious housewives in pharmaceutical advertising suggested medical solutions to a political problem; but they also – inadvertently – established and communicated a rich visual culture of women suffering in the particular context of the home, an imaginary which

also had considerable radical potential as a critique of contemporary gender relations.[64]

In this vein, historical and literary research on the disabled poster child, a recurring figure in the postwar publicity drives of American disability charities, shows how cultural *over*-representation could be a determinant of loneliness for disabled people. The March of Dimes, a fundraising campaign by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (later the National Foundation, then the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation), depicted childhood polio survivors in ways that promised an almost miraculous recovery while affording vanishingly little consideration to the lived experience of disability. Slogans such as 'Your dimes did this for me!' sat alongside images of confident, outspoken children.[65] Drawing together the perceived physical inadequacies of childhood and disability, the poster child articulated a progress narrative of human development that was as perfectible as it was exclusive.

These public narratives on polio were necessarily implausible, placing hard work and a vague recourse to medicine against an incurable neurological disease. As later attested in the memoirs of polio survivors of the 1940s and 50s, *loneliness* here meant a divided identity: the hijacking of their public self by its popular depiction, and the resulting estrangement from their actual lived experience. In effect, they suffered a loneliness of stereotype, fostered by an influential consumer culture. Writer and theorist Anne Finger recalls this division, noting how '[a]longside the self who was competent, precociously mature, and strong, another, more shadowed self lived – sensitive to criticism, fearful of being unable to live up to the world's expectations, and above all, lonely, for this was the part of ourselves we were supposed to keep well hidden.'[66] If everyone knew her as a disabled child, she felt ashamed for them to know her as herself; disability became paradoxically more visible as its experience was obscured. Likewise, memoirist Francine Falk-Allen remembers closely observing the figure as she grew up: '[it] is possible that people thought, *what a brave little girl*, when they saw the poster, and that they also thought this about me… I was just slightly perturbed that I didn't have a face to people – that I was identified by a limp, a brace, and crutches'.[67] Invoking both anonymity and hyper-visibility, Falk-Allen publicly identified herself with a face that was not her own.

If the post-war poster child was a kind of *performance* of disability, the material reality it represented was shunted off into the stage-wings. Orthotics, prosthetics, and other adjustment devices were themselves depicted only in the context of being overcome. Posters extolled children who stood up to – and powered through, and moved on from – the trappings of disability. In discussion of her prosthetic calf, Falk-Allen recounts having to '*put on the prosthesis I wear with double stockings over it so I can masquerade as normal*. This was similar to but more than the process every other high school girl was putting herself through'.[68] Such widely accepted ideas of progress promised disabled children an inevitable return to – or, at least, the pretence of – normality. Yet these narratives of growth and development solicited a division between public and private selves, the former coaxed into performing able-bodiedness as the

latter retreated further inwards. As the clock ran out on their childhoods, disabled people became less and less able to publicly identify with their bodies, and grew lonelier for it.

This kind of fine-grained historical work demonstrates how shame determines who occupies the position of the lonely, forcing people into a compulsory kind of sociality, or inducing states of depression and anxiety that arise from being cast out of social life.[69] Too often, discourses on loneliness in groups who are otherwise marginalised and excluded adopt registers of resignation or regret rather than anger or surprise.[70] Historicising the relationship between loneliness and public depiction, or demonstrating the precise terms under which the systemic devaluation of particular lives translates into estrangement from self and others, works against a pernicious acceptance of social pain. Under this lens, loneliness is something imposed, not intrinsic, and understanding the historical contours of this imposition is a necessary component of collective attempts at restitution.

## Implications

Taken together, these thematic studies illustrate the richness and depth of historical research on loneliness. They do not provide anything like a complete picture, either in terms of their engagement with the past, or in their synthesis of some of the scholarship presently taking place; indeed, there is much innovative, exciting, and rigorous work not discussed here. To a degree, the case studies speak for themselves, and contain their own specific insights. Significant challenges – and discussions – remain over the operationalisation of historical knowledge, and colleagues who resist what they see as instrumentalising and harmful impact agendas are right to do so; this is a game that cannot be played, from the perspective of the humanities, on these specific terms. In writing towards the present, we have knowingly taken on a particular kind of role, but we do so with the acknowledgement that our expertise is impossible without rich and thriving historical – and humanities – literatures, scholars, networks, and university departments, oriented primarily towards understanding the past. Connecting our research on loneliness with the work of psy and social scientists, doctors, public health and third-sector workers, and policymakers – as this document hopes to do – is just one expression of the vast and inalienable intellectual and public good that the humanities provides.

Mindful of this, we draw out the following collective implications:

- Historical work reveals loneliness as a profoundly complex experience with rich inner workings and embedded structural roots. It demands that we abandon – and can help shape a route map away from – superficial, managerial, and individualised approaches.
- Loneliness takes cultural form and the cultures that shape it are specific to place and time. This is important as it means that solutions to loneliness need to target

the causes of loneliness, and to recognise these will be distinctive to particular groups and contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

- Rather than treating loneliness as a crisis or epidemic, historical research draws attention to the liminal times and life transitions that frequently frame the experience. Research and intervention on loneliness might better address – and in the process, historicise – the pressure points in life which put relational health under particular strain.
- Past solutions for loneliness focused on finding ways to feel a part of society, community, or kinship again, whether through correspondence with distant friends or participating in social rituals to ease grief. When we consider the times that people might feel particularly alienated, we can also start to look at how those feelings can be eased.
- Recognising that respect, freedom from shame, and a sense of usefulness form a critical dimension against loneliness also means that responses cannot rely on company alone. Loneliness needs to be addressed as a problem of self and community where a place is built for people to find space for themselves and to be valued.
- Work on loneliness of any kind can be improved by dialogue with historical research. This might take the form of understanding where a particular problem, relationship, cause, or context comes from, and why that matters; following loneliness in a particular community, group, or profession over time; thinking about how the language and meaning of loneliness changes; or tracing salient cultural, social, economic, political, and demographic shifts.
- The best ways to do this are to engage directly with historians (or other scholars with substantial historical practices); to use this resource as a gateway to read and follow historians' research; and to invite them to speak, write, and collaborate on loneliness in different disciplinary and practical spaces.

Here and far more broadly, historical evidence and expertise has the potential to reshape and enliven how we conceptualise and respond to complex and pressing health challenges in the present day.[71] We take our place, therefore, as engaged and critical scholars with rigorous methodological approaches directly pertinent to the matter in hand. Our hope is that this document can be part of a wider movement towards a truly interdisciplinary approach to loneliness, which takes – and values – contributions from a plurality of perspectives and voices, and which interrogates our history to better shape our future.

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David Vincent is Emeritus Professor of Social History at The Open University. He has written widely on the histories of literacy, secrecy, privacy, and solitude, and his most recent book, *The Fatal Breath* (2023), assembled a contemporary social history of the COVID-19 pandemic. He is presently working on a history of silence.

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