**Loneliness and interpersonal connection`**

*Loneliness and Mental Health, University of Birmingham, 18/5/22*

I want to challenge the standard account of loneliness: **the absence account**.

**Preliminaries**

Experiences of loneliness are extremely diverse in their **forms**, **causes**, and **effects**.

We must take seriously the diversity of experiences of loneliness – eg ‘situational’ and ‘chronic’, connections to other experiences (grief etc.), and the different contexts in which people experience loneliness (eg end-of-life care, pandemic-lockdown).

Example of bad accounts: L as a transient state that “does not last forever”.

‘Interpersonal connection’ is diverse: many **ways** to ‘connect’ with others, many **kinds** of connection, many **reasons** we need/desire connections, many **effects** of being connected.

eg interpersonal connections can be brief, enduring, trivial, life-changing.

**The absence account**

Loneliness as feeling of **absence** of something: (a) social, (b) desirable or necessary, and (c) whose absence is therefore painful/negative.

Distinguish from

1. **isolation** - fact of being alone
2. **solitude** - absence-as-positive – as welcome respite, spiritually valuable, etc.

What is absent?

1. On **narrow** definitions, “absence of loving/intimate relationships.”
2. On **broad** definitions, social interactions, relationships, possibilities for connection, “sense of belonging” to the world.

Some form of the absence account seems entrenched in psychology, philosophy, mental health action and research, and among loneliness charities:

1. ‘the unpleasant experience that occurs when there is a subjective discrepancy between desired and perceived availability and quality of social interactions’ (Hawkley *et al* 2010)
2. ‘a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships’ (Ma *et al* 2020).
3. ‘the feeling that certain social goods are missing and out of reach, either temporarily or permanently’ (Roberts and Krueger 2021).
4. the [Campaign to End Loneliness](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/about-loneliness/): ‘loss or lack of social contact’ – ditto UK Govt loneliness strategy – ditto Jo Cox Loneliness Commission.

If the absence account is doing work, it should be ‘fit for purpose’. So, is it?

**Problems with absence account:**

Some general problems:

1. Ambiguous: absence of **relationships**, or **kinds** of rels, or **depths** of rels? All quite different things, reflecting different kinds of loneliness (e.g. lonely-within-marriage)

Plus temporarily-absent or permanently-absent? absent-my-fault or absent-your fault? Many varieties of absence to reckon with.

1. Many negative experiences involve the ‘unwanted absence of social connection’ (eg shame, guilt) – related to, but distinct from, loneliness.

But these preserve the central idea of loneliness-as-absence. Consider a different worry.

**Present for others**

Central to loneliness: experiences that enable interpersonal connections are absent for me but present for other people (Ratcliffe). There’s absence (for me) but presence (for others).

An important aspect of the **pain** of loneliness is the felt sense that social possibilities are absent-for-me-but-available-for-others.

Two metaphors for loneliness:

1. ‘key’
2. ‘hunger’

We can distinguish different kinds of present-for-others – eg ‘present-for-everyone-else’, ‘present-for-that-kind-of-person’, ‘present-for-you’ – more complexities.

Why might this ‘presence’ aspect matter for understanding loneliness?

1. It may explain the ways loneliness can involve questioning and self-questioning:
2. what is wrong with me that I lack the “social key”?
3. what is it about you, that these possibilities are present for you?
4. is it something I am doing wrong and can change? or some fixed feature of me?
5. why am I locked out of a world that you welcome other people into?
6. It may help explain the negative emotions often accompanying loneliness – feelings of, eg, bitterness, enviousness, jealousy, resentment, suspiciousness.
7. It may be an aspect of stigmatisation of loneliness (‘lonely losers’, ‘single-dwellers’).

**Closing question**

Is this sense of present-for-others a feature of all experiences of loneliness, or just some?

I suspect so, and think it adds to our understanding of loneliness. But let’s see!

IJK