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Loneliness and the cultural, spatial, temporal and generational bases of belonging

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists and psychologists now agree on the significance of belonging to the experience of loneliness. Yet to date, this is unevenly reflected in both survey instruments and qualitative inquiry where the focus is mostly on belongingness attributed to social connectivity, social support, intimate social bonds and interpersonal relationships. While these are very important, recent work on belonging itself has stressed the significance of much wider bases of belonging, including place, temporality, memory, mobilities, generation, culture, labour processes, kinship systems, residential arrangements, settlement patterns, the public sphere and more-than-human factors. Drawing on evidence from sociology and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, this paper brings these insights together for the first time in order to develop a deeper consideration of belonging for loneliness research, and especially to identify further sources of variation in loneliness. In this article we will concentrate on kinship, cultural, spatial, temporal and generational bases of belonging, which while discrete are also often interrelated and linked to wider social structural developments associated with individualism and neoliberalism. We argue that this research is a necessary foundation for the "all-of-government" strategies on loneliness that are just beginning to gain favour and traction through their consideration of individual and structural solutions.

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KEY POINTS

What is already known about this topic:

(1) One of the defining aspects of loneliness is where people feel an absence of belonging.
(2) We know that most people obtain a sense of belonging from interpersonal relationships.
(3) We know that belongingness needs for interpersonal relationships vary considerably, from those individuals satisfied by a very small numbers of relationships, to those with needs for far more.

What this topic adds:

(1) A discussion of historical, sociological and anthropological research that identifies family and kinship systems (and associated residential and group formation) as key cultural sources of variation in belonginess needs in migrant societies.
(2) Identifies other bases of belonging beyond those of interpersonal relationships that have a bearing on loneliness: a sense of belonging to place; a temporal sense of belonging, and belonging to other "more-than-human" sources entities (aesthetics, natures, companion animals, material cultures).
(3) A discussion of how other bases of belonging have a bearing on ameliorating loneliness, with implications for new "all-of government" strategies to address it.

Introduction

Drawing on those who have convincingly argued that loneliness is associated with unmet belongingness needs, this paper considers the relevance of other forms and sources of belonging, that, while contributing to belongingness needs, are rarely considered, or are not considered consistently, in loneliness studies. It deploys interdisciplinary sources from the social sciences and humanities, which draws less on quantitative methodologies and more on in-depth, historical, ethnographic, literary and socio-technical data. While acknowledging that personality and individual differences are important, it argues that our sense of belonging is significantly influenced by cultural, spatial, temporal, generational, and more-than human factors and contexts. In this sense, it is a sympathetic critique that seeks to extend and strengthen an already strong research tradition rather than challenge it. It is less to show a new body of evidence (although it will highlight indicative evidence) than to suggest new and fruitful points of departure, and perhaps an expanded language, for all the disciplines interested in tackling

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the spectre of loneliness in contemporary societies (Franklin et al., 2019; Van de Velde, 2018).

These will be presented in separate, overlapping sections below, encompassing: culture, kinship and ethnicity; the more-than-human bases of belonging; place and belonging (moving places, migration, home-sickness and the double absence of belonging; and haunted places); time and belonging and belonging to generations.

Culture, kinship and ethnicity

An implicit sociological assumption common to most previous studies of loneliness is its association with the efficacy and/or adequacy of human social bonds, especially those based on earlier definitions of "social or emotional loneliness", or those drawing on UCLA Loneliness Scale variants (built somewhat nervously, and precariously, from a list of proxy measures) (Russell, 1996; Valtorta et al., 2016; UK Government, 2018). It is widely accepted that the "desire for interpersonal attachments" is "a fundamental human motivation", and that this is directly connected to a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hughes et al., 2004; Mellor et al., 2008). In their "belongingness hypothesis", Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) argued that while belongingness needs are highly variable, all "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships". For some this might mean satisfaction with just one very strong bond with a spouse where others might need a larger and more varied composition (Kelly, 2001). Clearly such variations are very important for those seeking to advise and help lonely people, and so they have been the subject of some speculation, much of it considering such variables as "personality" and "psychotrophic" factors (Mellor et al., 2008). Although some studies have shown that the belongness needs associated with significant close social relationships are found in all cultures, this does not mean they are not also *culturally specific* in many, if not most cases. We therefore need to build more culturally informed data on the cultural structuration of belonging needs.

Part of the problem for the many studies that draw on large surveys or data bases in Western societies is the difficulty of disaggregating cultural groups and influences, some of which might be associated with regional, class, ethnic, religious, small migrant populations or other forms of cultural variation (Flood, 2005; Cacioppo et al., 2009; Valtorta et al., 2016). This is very significant for migrant societies. In many instances this variation stems from the culturally variable ways in which the size, pattern and specificity of core groups (those with whom a sense of belongingness needs are generated and shared) are reckoned, and the characteristic distribution of very strong social bonds (and norms of social support they uphold) within them through prescriptive and long-enduring patterns of residence and associational norms and rules. Anthropologists have long shown the effective operation of *cultural* prescriptions, and the associated normative preferences emanating from them, in determining different patterns of household, family and residential formation, many of which have deep historical antecedence and continuities in new social contexts (for example, among migrants in new countries) (Davis, 1978; Llobera, 2003). Part of our role in understanding loneliness and counselling lonely people is to identify the cultural contexts and specificities of their belongingness needs.

In a previous paper (Franklin et al., 2019), for example, it was shown how traditional norms of matrifocal residence in urban Britain continued in Anglo-Australian kinship practices, producing very different degrees and patterns of belonginess and loneliness among contemporary Australian men and women (Uhlmann, 2013). However, the study of kinship among migrant cultures might be used to systematically assess the cultural specificity of belonginess and loneliness across the broader social spectrum of multicultural Australia and built into training for counselling.

A comparative example will serve to demonstrate the value of such capacity building.

For the Nuer arriving from Sudan, a sense of belonging traditionally deriving from a unilineal descent system (in their case it is patrilineal, and traced through men descending from common paternal ancestors), provides for a fixed universe of members and a strong sense of belonging to a very large group from which social support is guaranteed through several segmented levels of scale (Evans Pritchard, 1940). This contrasts markedly with the cognatic reckoning of Anglo-Australian kinship in which descent is traced though both parents and a sense of group belonging to "kindreds" is restricted and weak. The kindred is, at best, a vague and fuzzy concept with no legal or civic standing, primarily because they are never the same for any two people, with the only exception of siblings (Llobera, 2003). Without having a joint common ancestor or a sense of group belonging to define them, Anglo-Australian family forms are instead ego-centred and overlapping as well as changing (for any one person) through the life course. Macfarlane's (1978) historical

study of the relatively unusual English kinship system demonstrated that the nuclear family was the emotional epicentre and locus of belonging, that many older children tended to be spatially dispersed from a relative young age onto separate careers elsewhere, that marriage was the especially strong bond and that independent, isolated settlement patterns were the norm for the majority since at least the 14th century. Thus, Macfarlane concludes that individualism was a strong feature of English culture and one that prefigured its early industrial revolution rather than the other way around. The Nuer, on the other hand, formed far larger corporate structures of belonging and social support and these are being mobilised effectively in contemporary circumstances as migrants to Western nations.

Historically, the Nuer have exogamous marriage rules meaning they must marry outside their own clans and, following marriage there is a definite preference for patrilocal residence (married couples settling in the locality of the husband's parents or other patrilineal kin) – a pattern which continues today, even among migrant Nuer (Shandy, 2005, p. 1049). In effect, this means that women left their natal family and clan and joined their husband's, a process that also separates women from their places of birth and becoming and the daily emotional support of their birth family, clan and patrilineage, while preserving those of their husbands.

In recent years, the Nuer have been involved in shifting political changes at the national level, including civil war, refugee camps and migration to the USA, Australia and elsewhere. Despite such churning and social structural change, the force of tradition and culture typically persists in what sociologists have called "the interaction order", as stubborn and static continuities (Butera, 2008, p. 268; Goffman, 1983, p. 5), of the sort contained in kinship and residential expectations and arrangements. As with other migrants with unilineal descent, the Nuer sense of belonging continues to reside in the descent group, where significant members and the social corporation it constitutes might be missed, needed and longed for. For those used to living in settlements and households dominated by members of their group, the prospect of living as an isolated remnant (such as a nucleated family) in a strange foreign city is doubly difficult. In Australia for example, Deng (2015, p. 4), found that "Adaptation to the new environment induces changes regarding gender roles and social support ....Changes in gender roles within families can sometimes lead to feelings of status loss, particularly for men ... ". Holtzman (2015) showed how, in the early stages of Nuer resettlement in the USA, loneliness was "a major problem", particularly because they had been scattered across the country, with very few in any one city. Subsequently, the Nuer have slowly formed larger concentrations in fewer cities, and these accretions are to some extent structured through pre-existing structures of kinship and belonging. By 1995 Minnesota had become a hot spot for Nuer refugees nationally, though two years later Omaha Nebraska become the most favoured town and many Nuer from Minnesota moved there. Holtzman (2015, p. 150) suggests that the Nuer, who were traditionally semi-nomadic transhumant pastoralists, may have adapted their historically mobile social structure. He writes: "To move from one place to another in pursuit of better opportunities has been a method of survival for Nuer refugees for over a decade – to continue to do so, then has perhaps become a normal way of life for many Nuer".

Thus, as Franklin et al., 2019 showed with other examples, it is impossible to understand or ameliorate patterns of loneliness adequately without reference to the operation of specific kinship and residence norms that structure belongness needs among different cultural groups.

More-than-human bases of belonging

Although there are multiple forms of belonging implicated in the experience of loneliness, not all of them involve the absence of human "co-presence". Sociology has moved a long way since the arrival of loneliness studies in the 1960s and the UCLA Loneliness Scale in 1978, when it viewed loneliness as having mainly social (insufficient numbers of connections and low levels of social support) or emotional origins (e.g., loss of, or separation from loved ones). Of particular relevance here are advances in the understanding of the temporal, spatial, material, aesthetic, technical, and embodied/sensual nature of social and cultural life (Fox & Alldred, 2017; Latour, 1993; Matthewman, 2013; Whatamore, 2006). Sociology has also been transformed by new theoretical advances from Deleuzian philosophy and the more-than-human horizons opened up by actor-network theory, posthumanism, cybernetics, human-animal studies, and the New Materialism (Fox & Alldred, 2017; Latour, 1993; Pyyhtinen, 2016). As Andrew Pickering argues, sociology no longer conceives of social life as something exclusively lived by "humans among themselves" (Pickering, 2008). "The social" is no longer conceived of as a discrete and separable ontological domain, and there is now greater awareness of how social life extends into and is inextricably entangled with the non-human (Whatamore, 2006; Haraway, 2006; Latour, 2010; Tsing, 2013). Consequently,

it is becoming increasingly obvious that our feelings of belonging are not limited to human relationships whether real or virtual. Vanessa May suggests that "a sense of belonging is complex, encompassing our relational, cultural and sensory connections" (2011, p. 364). In contemporary societies such as Australia, for example, companion animals are now reckoned as part of the family among a majority of household that have a cat, dog or bird (Franklin, 2006, 2016).

As loneliness researchers, we were alerted to the significance of other bases of belonging from our first two national surveys of loneliness in Australia (Franklin & Tranter, 2008, 2011). We included questions asking about loneliness (focussed around the question: "How often have you personally experienced loneliness in your life?"). We were puzzled by responses to the follow-up question which probed what our respondents identified as the main cause of their loneliness. We offered characteristic options associated with social and emotional loneliness; whether their social networks had been adversely impacted by their mobilities or moves of any kind (or those of friends), or the loss of, or separation from loved ones, and we anticipated that these would account for most of our cases. However, 51% of women and 61% of men ticked "Other" or Don't know (33/36% for Other and 18/25% for "Don't know", respectively).

We speculated that there were at least two possible reasons for this. One reason so many ticked "Don't Know" was because no obvious, or typical reason stood out. Perhaps several or all of their important relationships and sources of belonging (with employers, spouses and partners, work mates, with localities and local communities, political parties, unions, etc) were gradually losing their capacity to offer a sense belonging in ways they once did. Influenced by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, (2000) who charted a gradual loosening and weakening of once-strong social bonds across civil society since the 1970s, in tandem with the pursuit of ever greater freedom from "ties that bind", we considered that the answer might be because of a "slow, compounding creep of ever-weaker social ties". The social ties still exist formally, but their capacity to protect us from loneliness was diminished. Because we were interested in how loneliness impacted face-to face social relationships, and the embodied processes through which a sense of belonging was perceived, we also considered how this slow creeping change might have registered on the "pre-reflexive, embodied interfaces of belonging" (Franklin et al., 2019; Patulny & Seaman, 2017). In other words, we wondered whether many people might have begun to *feel* their lives becoming incrementally lonelier, without being able to put their finger on specific changes or causes.

For those who ticked "Other" we considered several possibilities, among which, some were with 'more-than -human entities, for example, to place, time, companion animals and cultural eras etc. In a very real sense, we can belong to specific times and cultures and we can develop strong bonds of belonging with place and companion animals (Franklin, 2006, 2016; May, 2017, 2018). Such times that once provided a strong sense of belonging to something vital and important, do come to an end and impact our sense of belonging. It could be school or university days, a job, a social movement, a sports team, a cultural period (Reynolds, 2019), a political/wartime struggle (Freedman, 2014; Croall, 2015) or our youth (Watkins, 2013; May, 2017). Equally, it might relate to the onset of new era that offers a *reduced sense of belonging*. Michael Rustin's (2014) article entitled "Belonging to oneself alone: The spirit of neoliberalism", suggests that the neoliberal era specifically targeted the collectivist sense of belonging of the preceding period through individualised values, working conditions, and organisational changes. Every period of time that we sense as eras have, what cultural sociologist Raymond Williams (1961, 1979)) called, a unique "structure of feeling", a way of life and a way of being in the world: the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships". This sense of belonging involves multiple elements or assemblages of language, literatures, materials, political directions, aesthetics, texts, humour and rhythms that give shape and meaning to those who live in a shared culture/way of life. Such times can be, and are lost, and this notion will be developed further below when we consider "time" more broadly. Because we rarely consider these biographical sources of belonging in empirical research, we do not yet know how they impact contemporary forms and patterns of loneliness, but there needs to be new thinking around its implications for loneliness, in the workplace, in the public sphere and management norms with the aim to build policies that nurture, rather than undermine a widespread sense of belonging.

Place and belonging

The continuous modernisation of cities and the restructuring of labour markets in the 1950s and 1960s maintained high levels of spatial and social mobility, scattering individuals from old industrial village-like communities of cities to unfathomable depths of loneliness on new outer estates, high rise blocks and new

towns (Young & Wilmott, 1957; Bryson & Thompson, 1972; Raban, 1974; Glendinning & Muthesius, 1994). So, here is another way in which belongingness needs can become unmet. Younger women with children were taken from very familiar places to entirely new places, new configurations of dwelling and an absence of neighbourhood culture. Among the first to study the impact of relocation to high-rise living was Raban who noted that: "The stay-at-home mother in a tower block flat can be as alone as an astronaut marooned in space: indeed, the sociological space in which she moves is almost as uncharted" (Raban, 1974, p. 21). This was not an isolated case. Raymond Williams, (1961) commented that the churning effect of the Second World War and the rebuilding of European cities in its aftermath produced a generalised loss of belonging with distinct spatial and architectural roots: "The experience of isolation, of alienation, and of self-exile is an important part of the contemporary structure of feeling". And it was focussed around a new geography of not-belonging. Influential architects working in the formative years of the 1950s and 1960s, not only rejected the built form they were seeking to replace, they also rejected its promiscuous self-contained sociability/kinship system as outdated. Explicitly rejecting the backward looking and, in their view, romantic work of sociologists, influential architects Alison and Peter Smithson wrote that "the concept of a balanced, self-contained community is both theoretically untenable and practically wasteful" and "in modern urban society there are no natural groupings above the level of the family". The untethered individual, rather than the community, was the new entity being supported by the architects of modern societies (Bauman, 1992). They believed their architecture and planning could initiate creative associations of new, more mobile modern individuals and cultures (Glendinning & Muthesius, 1994, p. 122). The Smithsons were the authors of new high-density, high-privatism living, a style that is back in vogue and giving that distinctive look to the small to medium rise apartment building now rampant in Australian cities. With barely any of the public spaces included in the mid-twentieth century equivalents, there are rising concerns about its potential to foster loneliness and mental health problems (Norrie, 2012; Lutton, 2017; Farrelly, 2018).

Loneliness had been encountered before, though it often went under a different name during the early waves of European migration to the New World. There was considerable interest given to the romantic notion of setting off for a home far away, and the feelings of *homesickness* it induced. This is of current interest because in addition to its implications for separation and loss of human relationships, it alerts us to the significance of place and landscape to our sense of belonging. The experience of migrants subsequent to their departure is critical to understand when considering the place of loneliness in migrant societies such as Australia, where even today 30% of the population were born overseas (ABS, 2020). The absence of a feeling of belonging is common among Australian migrants, regardless of their substantial efforts to connect to others and even build their own communities. It has complex, multiple causes and has affected them long into old age (Marino, 2019).

Homesickness and loneliness featured powerfully from the very beginning of white settlement in Australia and is reflected in its early poetry, especially as it impacted young women joining husbands on their socially isolated "selections" across rural Australia, e.g., George Essex Evans's *The Women of the West*, Henry Lawson's *Past Carin'* and Louis Esson's *The Shearer's Wife* (Franklin, 2006). The poetry often extolled the virtues of familiar landscape and settlements as essential ingredients of well-being.

Some of the first ethnic diasporas through the nineteenth century, from places such as Ireland, were associated with "homesickness", prompting volumes of Victorian writing about the poignant, poetic and tragic emotions it evoked. The objects of such emotion extended beyond human bonds to include the material, aesthetic and sensual coordinates of belonging that attached to the notion of "home" (McLholland, 1892). Again, the notion of home has more-than-human qualities we should be alert to.

Accounts of homesickness among Irish migrants referenced a more-than-human form of belonging, which evoked not just a longing for culturally specific social relationships, of villagers and close family, but *ways of life* and *structures of feeling* that were uniquely rural Irish. The pace of life, the material base of agriculture, the fragrance and light from a gloaming peat fire, the connections to land and animals. Moore's, (2000) short story *Home Sickness*, drew a powerful contrast between such Edenic evocations and the squalid conditions of slum life that awaited migrants in New York. Here is where a bar worker, became sick, and on doctor's advice welcomed a chance to make a trip back to Ireland, after 13 years away. He found his home just as he left it, and he spent his days adjusting to its pace, helping with the hay making, fishing in the lake and eventually meeting a girl, dancing with her to the local music and drinking local whisky with old village friends. But on becoming engaged to the girl, he began to see such a future life there with dread: their domination by the priest and landlord, the poverty, the borderline

viability of their farms, the endless toil for so little reward. A letter from an American friend brought on the realisation that he must return, which he did with great haste. It is an archetypal story of the migrant: unable to belong properly to the new place, yet no longer wanting to live in the still-loved old place; a frightening, liminal sense of belonging nowhere. This trope is deeply embedded in societies such as Australia yet is seldom picked up by our research instruments or discussions of loneliness. Given the continuing need to recruit needed skills from overseas, building a sense of belonging among new migrants could become a useful policy objective in future.

Marino's, (2019) ethnographic study of Calabrian (Italian) migrants to post-war Adelaide is an exception and he adds material relationality and generational depth to snapshots of individual experiences of liminality. The loss of their home and its landscape was compounded by their rejection by former friends and countrymen whose recognition, respect and friendship were crucial to whatever sense of belonging they had. In Italy, individual and family life spills out into public spaces, especially the piazza (square). Belonging for the men and women of Palizzi, Calabria is given, affirmed daily and sustained through their presence in the intangible social-spatial qualities of the *public sphere*, that focusses on the piazza. It is made possible by the scale and inclusiveness of it as a space that allows people to slow down, mingle, sit and meet. Belongingness there has both more-than-family and more-than-human qualities. Without the piazza it would be impossible to sense belonging in Palizzi (Whyte 2001).

Francesco (aged 80) told Marino (2019, p. 29) that while "Australia had provided u pani e a casa [bread and a house], he has never felt at home there, and although he is able to speak English, after fifty years he feels alone and lost".

> After fifteen years I went back to Calabria, to Palizzi. I wanted to see whether I could return … . I saved some money. I went to the square, my eyes filled with tears of joy, I was so happy. Peppe, nu paisanu [a fellow countryman] who used to be my best friend, said: "Ah, people, look, here is the Australian! What did you bring for us? Did you bring money? Why did you come for? Do you still speak Italian, Mr. Francesco?" They called me Mr. Francesco, not Don Ciccio, as they used to call me before … .I lost the respect they owed me … They treated me as a stranger!

Here are the factors that make us look further beyond the personality of the lonely/homesick individual. Marino's elderly respondents were from the first generation of southern Italians to migrate to Australia. They reported an unremitting, life-long discrimination from their Australian co-workers and managers and suffering racial abuse, bullying and unfair treatment their entire working life. Talking to Marino in their old age another man was exhausted by an absence of belonging in his life (Marino, 2019, p. 28):

> Here I feel fine only at home or when I attend religious feasts. I often dream to be elsewhere. I do not feel this is my place, but the strange thing is that it happened even in Italy, twenty years ago, when I returned. … . Every time I curse my village, when I am there, but I dream about it when I am in Australia.

While these men formed a supportive and vibrant Italian community in Adelaide, they were never more than outsiders. The migrant pioneering men married wives from their localities in Calabria and their children bore the brunt of the same racism, discrimination and bullying in schools, to the extent that they felt ashamed at belonging to an Italian family and the Italian community.

Marino borrows the term "double absence" from Sayad's (2004) study of Algerian immigrants in Paris, to capture his respondent's sense of homelessness and "belonginglessness". For Sayad (2004, p. 143), it arises from biographic fragmentation and biographic trauma, and, for such people " … .the most tightly knit groups of close friends and relations (spouse children parents, brothers and sisters) are not enough to protect him from loneliness. Loneliness is a total mortification of the being, and we can grasp only the symptoms, namely the transformations of all rhythms … that structure … social life".

Homesickness emerged again in recent years among college and university students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Watt & Badger, 2009). Here, experiences similar to migrants were discovered. Paul & Brier, (2001) coined the term "friendsickness" after finding that friends from home dominated the friendships circles of most students in college. However, in their study of "currently homesick students", Van Tilburg et al. (1997) used open-ended survey questions and found a majority who reported they were not homesick because they had not made new friends but because of missing persons from home (82.7%), missing the environment (81.4%), and missing the atmosphere of the old environment (87.7%). Here again is clear evidence that a strong sense of belonging resides in connections of various kinds, including more-than-human settings and relationships. We need to recognise this as a possible source of loneliness; understand this sense of belonging to place

more clearly; and find new concepts and language to access it empirically as well as build new policies to help those who suffer from it.

Belonging and the materiality of place

How do we belong to place? Indigenous Australians emphasis their belonging to “country”, but how do settler Australians come to belong in the places they live in? Cities, villages, districts, valleys and suburbs are not merely bricks, mortar and rock and tarmac, nor are they merely neutral substrate for more crucial social relations that dwell within them. They are interwoven and active in our everyday lives; they are the socially “sticky” spatial settings and materials to which adhere our experiences and biographies as they shift and change across the life course, and thus do they become repositories of memory; containers for, and participants in, our stories. For each individual, their lives trace out lines of memory across space; as mnemonics recorded onto buildings, paths, riverbanks, roads, shops, parks, walks-to-work, bus routes and hang outs and the multitude of other ways place acquires the traces of our embodied movements and experiences. They have a textual quality, like story lines; they are sensual, and they are aesthetic. These narrations accompany our lives, forming backcloths in the real time of the present, in every moment of our life, as well as in recall. They interiorise the settings and environments of our lives and exteriorize ourselves, as we are inscribed ghost-like onto every surface and moment of time.

Nobody puts this better than novelist Will Self in “Big Dome”, an essay on his home in London:

> ‘But now the city is filled in with narratives, which have been extruded like psychic mastic into its fissures. There is no road I haven’t fought on, no cul – de-sac I haven’t ended it all, no alley I haven’t done it down. To traverse central London today, even in a car, even on autopilot, is still to run over a hundred memories’.
>
> (Self, 1999, p. 113)

As a sociologist interested in the weakening social bonds of the early 2000s, the significance of loneliness in visceral terms was aroused first [for author Franklin] from personal experience, when their mother was diagnosed with dementia and they became her Attorney, Health and Welfare from 2005–2016, and main carer. She had significant memory loss and was nearly deaf. She suffered untold loneliness. In their amplified phone calls she would always say first that she was lonely. There were people all around her who she knew very well, friends and neighbours seen daily (excellent in emergencies), including a group of carers she liked, yet she was seemingly locked out of her life. Things changed for her when the author began to take her drives around the districts in which her life had played out. This was a life changing experience for her. The following was taken from a diary entry:

> I knew the sweet spots and the scenes of drama; where she was born and had lived on a farm in a converted Kentish oast house; where she had lived in the old town centre of Canterbury; the convent where she went to school and learned piano and where she had worked during the war; where the German bombs dropped on her city and around her home, including her home; where she went courting with my father, in beauty spots and coasts, and where we swam in the sea as a family on warm summer evenings or walked along the storm battered beaches of winter. Driving in good light at midday, each place yielded her memories back to her with crystal clarity, all the stories, and all the people and all the events were instantly there for her! Being in these places triggered memories that failed her elsewhere. She enjoyed narrating the drives and they became her great joy, such were these seemingly miraculous reunions with herself . . . . It was as if these places were speaking to her, reminding her; that she was part of them, reunited with them.

A sense of belonging to place also stems from an intimacy with its particularity, character and uniqueness. It involves growing to find pleasure in its beauty and singularity and gaining a knowledge of its rhythms and secrets. In this sense we are not only inscribed on its surfaces as memory traces, but deeply immersed in it, and being part of its emergent, immanent qualities. This performative, “growing-together-with” relationship with the more-than-human world is just as real as any other. In her essay entitled “Street Haunting”, Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 2014) famously takes the reader on a walk she does frequently through her corner of London, at the end of a winter’s day. She, the insider native, is guiding us through crowded twilight streets, with flows of office workers making their way over Thames bridges to catch trains home to the suburbs. We pass two lovers leaning over the Thames embankment talking “with that curious lack of self-consciousness”, and a pair of ragged men excitedly “discussing a horse race under a streetlamp”. Woolf wants us to see her London as a unique unpredictable, socio-technical, mysterious, magical, beautiful and infinitely creative place, like a species or an ecology. Again, these seemingly intangible qualities have a significant impact on our identity and sense of belonging to place, that can be and are increasingly lost through the contemporary life course. A significant part of the neoliberal imaginary is the perfection and

extension of flexibility, a feature that has dramatically increased mobility. The sociologist John Urry (2000, 2007) pioneered a new domain of contemporary sociology that documented how we have shifted from a mostly sedentary to a hypermobile polity, something that retained a romantic and positive notion of travel and translocation, while eroding social life as we knew it. Equally, Marc Augé (1995) noted the contemporary prevalence of time spent in what he called "non-places" – airports and other transit spaces, shopping malls, motorways, hotels – socially neutral spaces that offer no social relationships, group identity or belonging. The new concern about contemporary loneliness is related to these changes in our relationships to space and mobility and warrants new research on its implications and costs to wellbeing and health. Can we continue to assume that people, or all people, can move without serious cost, that the new spaces we develop are merely neutral substrate? Consideration for how well public buildings build a sense of belonging could well become a policy objective in future.

Times and belonging

Over the past 10 years Vanessa May has explored the connections between belonging and time and established a strong and nuanced understanding of its contours and significance. For May, "a fundamental element of belonging is *where in time people feel at home*, which in turn has consequences for how they can construct a coherent sense of self" and a viable means of addressing loneliness (May, 2017, p. 402). All forms of belonging exist within a time frame, whether exclusively in the present, whether what Coleman (2008) called the "living past" (where the difference between past and present is not perceived) or whether it is located in different pasts. Our selves always depend first, on a sense of time passing, that provides the basis for all of us to "*become someone*", and second, the working and reworking of memory, to provide a narrative of our self in time that corresponds to, and locates us as an entity within a culturally recognisable universe. There is a double oscillation described by Bergson (1896/1988) in which our present circumstances determine what parts of our past become relevant, a process that builds images of ourselves which then begin to operate on how we relate to present circumstances and guide future lines of action. For May (2017, p. 403), " … a memory-image of past belonging can become a perception of belonging in the now. In other words, memory can be used to ameliorate a present lack of belonging". In the future such extended understandings of time might be operationalised purposefully through counselling policy. This can become a strategy through which lonely people can address their own loneliness, an activity that May has called "belonging from afar".

May developed these insights through her work using data from the UK's Mass Observation Programme (MOP), (a writing project intended to construct an archive of everyday life in Britain). Analysing 25 written accounts on nostalgia, May suggests that nostalgia can be richly positive for building more resilience and confidence to cope with the churning nature of modernity. Described as "a personal contemplation of a valued experience in the past … that one does not expect to have again" (Dickinson & Erben, 2006), nostalgia was once seen as a defeatist retreat, a failure to adapt to change and develop future-facing resilience. May emphasises a newer view of nostalgia as a base for building stable identities and confidence sufficient to weather and embrace change, and an ability to consider valuable aspects of the past as a component for renewal and future satisfaction (Pickering & Keightley, 2015). In May's view (May, 2017, p. 412), nostalgia can also be used as "a technique to bring warmth and vitality to the present", that our pasts and our memories of the past are not things that necessarily recede and die. As with all memory work, it can be edited and reworked in ways that benefit the present.

The MOP enables researchers to pitch writing assignments to the project's large panel of (c.500) volunteer respondents. May, (2017, p. 405) pitched one about experiences of belonging "in relation to a range of sources, including people, places and culture, and to also reflect on instances when they have not belonged … .and to reflect upon changes in their sense of belonging, and to consider possible reasons for these changes". A changed sense of time was therefore prominent in her 25 accounts, (only 4 insisted that their sense of belonging was in the here and now.) Although her small sample ranged from age 44–91, and was comprised largely of older citizens (average 71), it provided valuable perspectives on researching and addressing loneliness among older people in that 21 (84%) described their temporal sense of belonging as residing in the past, "while the present offers reduced or no sources of belonging". It means that surveys that are orientated mostly to present circumstances may fail to gather pertinent data about active states of belonging, and intervention strategies that fail to address individuals' pasts may miss opportunities to bring belonging back into the present. In an ageing society this is significant. May's question bank could be adapted for more extensive survey inquiry to explore patterns in larger populations.

May wrote at length about two forms of "belonging from afar". The first she calls "temporal displacement" which evokes *place nostalgia*. This is where a strong sense of belonging exists in former places of residence – places as they once were; or places that have since changed but are still inscribed with the memories and movements of an earlier part of life. Changed places can still give a pleasurable sense of belonging in the present, even if they come tinged with sadness and loss.

The second form, "temporal migration", is associated with *era nostalgia*, the sense of belonging most to former times of life, their associated subcultures, material cultures, styles and structures of feeling. These often relate to formative periods of life: university, youth subcultures or other periods that offered people a sense of belonging to something significant and inclusive. Feeling that there is no longer "this larger thing" to belong to, some individuals can feel adrift, though constantly drawn back to an era "when their generation flourished." These nostalgic longings can stop a person feeling at home in the present, but they are easily accessed by active temporal agency and even legitimised and recovered through retrospective subcultures and re-enactment scenes (Reynolds, 2011), all feasible objectives for policy makers to consider.

Living through significant eras leave indelible marks on our consciousness that cannot be shared with those who come after us. Shortly after the Berlin Wall came down, novelist Doris Lessing (1990) reflected on a previously momentous period of political ferment in her life.

> 'After the Twentieth Congress I knew I had lived through an extraordinary time, but now it was over. What had ended was a political atmosphere – and this is always impossible to describe to later people, who are living in a different, equally compelling atmosphere, nearly always inimical to the first. In the last few weeks we have seen a similar sudden change, one that no one foresaw, and the way we all thought so recently will rapidly seem improbable.

These strongly formed attachments to times past, include periods of social change (political struggles, war and conflict etc) where the welling-up of social solidarity is often more inclusive and vibrant. Using oral history, Jean Freedman (2014) uncovered the ironic, but nonetheless strong sense of loss many Londoners felt after the Second World War, a longing that only began to fade in the 1970s. As Croall (2015, p. 185) noted: "Many see the period as one in which their own lives had more meaning than they did at other times, before or since." This example is especially compelling given that this was a period of great loss, violence, fear and anxiety, though the point is very much not to value nostalgia per se, but to note periods that offer a sense of belonging can be missed if it is missing in the present. For our purposes here, the most important aspect of this research is how it frames new questions for current policy makers, notably: shouldn't everyone feel a sense of belonging? And if so, how can we foster that?

Culture is experienced collectively and temporally, and many feel a strong sense of belonging to cultural movements and moments: music and dance styles, periods of aesthetic effervescence (e.g., Punk, Mod, Goth, Glam-rock, Indie Pop Rave, UK Drill etc) which include, but are not limited to, human co-presence /relationships. Such times were often articulated powerfully through their music, iconography, fashions, texts, events, collections, video/films and online platforms. Many cultural forms still offering belongingness after their "historic period" were the products of mass media technologies and mass cultures, each of which offered the possibility of "shared culture" in specific points of time (Reynolds, 2011, 2019). Entire generations watched together the scheduled broadcasts of the Flintstones, Friends, Home and Away, or Monty Pythons and heard the Beatles, Bob Dylan and Olivier Newton John. It is hard to imagine anyone not belonging, in an important sense, to the popular audiences of radio and television, the familiarity of which permit endless possibilities for pleasurably shared nostalgic reflections and conversations between unrelated people.

Stephen Reynolds (2011, 2019) argues that popular cultures shared at specific points in time allowed mass audiences to develop a strong sense of belonging. This was made possible through technologies such as vinyl records, free-to-air radio and TV. Vinyl records gave a material-aesthetic expression to a structure of feeling that could be built, retained and shared through collecting, parties and dance. Such shared cultures gave mass audiences a reliable and inexhaustible community of belonging, that has only recently begun to dwindle, and which might be included in the "slow creep of ever weaker social ties."

Through later technologies of "file sharing" and then streaming, the sense of belonging to shared cultural moments became fragmented, brittle and elusive, as the flow of new music became a relentless torrent. When fewer landmark songs and albums stood out and stayed around for longer for comment and group appreciation, they no longer defined collective

moments and periods of time. For Reynolds (2019, pp. 1–3), changes in what he calls "culture time" have impacted the last ten years especially:

> The reason that it feels like nothing happened in the 2010s is that too much happened. Each cultural landmark got instantly effaced by the onrush of the next, and the next. … This memory-erosion effect is one reason why it feels like something's gone awry with our sense of time. While the clock and the calendar continue to plod forward in their steadfast and remorseless way, what you could call 'culture-time' feels like it's become unmoored and meandering … .A discussion about music with an old friend or a new acquaintance can go quite a long way before you find something that you have both heard.

So, "slowly but surely, streaming was killing the idea of a mainstream." and with it, the possibility of belonging to a mainstream culture, of a sort that might connect perfect strangers meeting in a retirement home and allow them to sing together and enjoy reliving their shared time. How music, drama and theatre (once ritual and public elements of social life) might again galvanise belonging through shared experiences, time and memory might become a policy objective in a society wishing to build belonging into a normative part of contemporary culture.

Generation

It has puzzled sociologists to find people sensing loneliness in the day rooms of old people's homes, retirement villages and in friendly enough neighbourhoods (Cohen, 2000; Stanley et al., 2010). It is quite common for very old people, surrounded by others in their lives to become lonely, not because they want for social connection or social support, but because they crave the very specific form of belonging that only people of their own time, their generation, can properly provide. These are other people whose common experiences, tastes, values and memories are framed around belonging to a cultural milieu that has long passed. It's a subset of people they knew whose numbers dwindle and fall away. We all belong to generations then, which are as much cultural formations as they are social in their content and structure. They each have distinctive experiences and characteristic mixes of feelings associated with them. In this sense, generations are truly things we live *in* and which define us. To be cut adrift from living exponents of our generation is experienced by profound feelings of loneliness.

One of Dahlberg's (2007, p. 199) respondents, an experienced carer of older people expressed this well:

> … well, maybe you don't have any friends left alive, maybe they're already gone or in a care home somewhere. You don't have anyone to share your memories with, your … [Silence] well, your shared times, thoughts and, yes, who speaks your own language somehow from the time you've lived in. … .I know that they experience it that way, many elders, that you can get so tired from only talking to younger people. You need your own generation, sort of.

Conclusion

In a recent letter to the *Lancet*, a group of leading researchers argued that "large gaps remain in our understanding of loneliness, rates and drivers of loneliness in different populations, its effect on health and wellbeing, and evidence on effective interventions" (O'Sullivan, 2020, p. 114). A similar conclusion was reached by the UK's all-of-government strategy to address loneliness (UK Government, 2018, pp. 7, p. 20). This article responded to such calls by identifying and elaborating a set of social bases of belonging beyond our interpersonal attachments, that are relevant to understanding contemporary loneliness, and strategies for tackling it.

First, the paper argued that the reckoning of belongingness needs is directedly related to core aspects of culture and ethnicity – notably through widely divergent kinship systems that identify the normative scale and composition of core groups, as well as the normative expectations and obligations associated with residence, settlement and social support. The paper argued that while previous research had identified associations and characteristic patterns of belonging and loneliness in the matrifocal orientation of Anglo-Australians (Franklin et al., 2019), it is important to extend this evidence base by identifying the pattern of belongness needs among all migrant groups, to assist successful resettlement in the first pace and to assist those who become lonely. The example of the Nuer and their migration to the USA and Australia illustrated the depth of ethnographic knowledge that is required to tackle loneliness in multicultural settings of a globalised world. And the example of previous waves of migration from Ireland and Italy illustrated the kinds of long-term suffering, ill health and unhappiness that can be experienced when such belonginess needs remain unmet over a lifetime and across generations.

The case of Italian migrants also illustrates why the new UK strategy on loneliness needed to be an all-of government approach, since the ethnic abuse and rejection that prevented many of them from developing a sense of belonging in Australia was encountered in the workplace, the community and in schools.

Second, through indicative sketches of our complex relationships with "place", it was shown how and why place connects to an important sense of belonging, yet how, at the same time, it has remained in a continuous state of tension (and contradiction) with social structural, political and economic dependency on mobilities of many kinds, over ever-greater distances. Unpacking the notion of belonging to place reveals just how much our social world is entangled with the more-than-human world around us and how we need to give as much attention to environmental, aesthetic, natural, technological and cultural factors. New policy might be advanced by understanding how people successfully build connections of belonging in new places. Equally, it might prompt rethinking around the value of retirement moves versus remaining in familiar places.

Third, it was argued that we need to develop a deeper understanding of the temporal qualities of belonging. Following the work of May, it was shown how belonginess connects to specific times of our lives and how we can mobilise memory to "belong from afar" and to revitalise how we live in the present. It was also shown how our sense of belonging to periods of our past can be enhanced or lost through technological and cultural change, and how belonging to "generations" with specific cultures, experiences and language is important to our sense of belonging through the life course, playing a critical role among older people especially.

All of these changes must be understood as having common and in many cases structural roots that require structural changes at a government policy levels, in addition to being able to understand and help lonely individuals as they present to intervention agencies. The article pointed to the way family structures, residential/architectural/urban planning changes have combined with neoliberal changes in the workplace, consumption and individuation and increased mobilities to produce a raft of structural conditions conducive to loneliness among more people, at more points in the lifecycle than was the case when loneliness first emerged as a social problem in the 1960s, primarily among the elderly and later among adolescents and young adults (Bauman, 2000; Elliott & Lemert, 2008; Franklin, 2012; Victor et al., 2009). The paper identified a broad *deficit of belonging* connected to Bauman's (2000) notion of liquid modernity, from the individualised neoliberal worlds of work, community and consumption to the related forms liquefaction of stronger bonds of the modern welfare state and interpersonal relations. These deficits were manifested through overlapping and related experiences of culture, time, place and generation and it is through understanding these experiences that new government level initiative can begin to build effective structural policy responses.

Despite the fruitful provisional work on all the bases of belonging identified here, it must be concluded that research in this area is only just beginning to gain traction and must be developed further. We must develop national ethnographies of belonging that encompass these bases; that can be deployed in developing new ways to build, or rebuild connection and belonging for everyone, whether in existing or in new contexts. National ethnographies would seek to identify an ethnographic description of all of its national sub-cultures and within each one, key bases of belonging stemming from kinships systems (and in particular identifying those characteristically at risk from loneliness in different/new settings following movement or migration), sources of social support, residence norms, normative interaction groups, friendships/pseudo kinships norms, and other group activities (occupational, generational, public sphere and in social media). In addition, such ethnographies could usefully identify spatial aspects of residence, demographic concentrations, attachments to place(s) and historic senses of home in different cities, regions and neighbourhoods. Such ethnographies would also benefit from biographical ethnographies of loneliness across the life course and by gender and any other sources of variation. It is a significant task but it is important work. It will be an interdisciplinary task to assemble this and it will address as much the immediate needs of those who have become lonely as the structural conditions that render so many at-risk from loneliness. Combined with more all-of-government approaches, it would become part of a more sophisticated evidence-based approach to loneliness. There is not space to here to document or second guess how new and emerging governmental policy initiatives will this utilise new knowledge on belonging in forming loneliness policy but the ambitious policy possibilities identified throughout this article offer multiple starting points.

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