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Commentary

Landscapes, cultures and technologies of loneliness: A call for participatory research with young adults

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ABSTRACT

In this viewpoint, we propose directions for research about loneliness among young adults. We argue that loneliness should not be individualized as a problem of ‘lonely people’ and ‘at risk’ groups but rather approached as an environmental and collective problem. Based on scholarship about the challenges that young adults face nowadays we identify three central themes: landscapes, cultures and technologies of loneliness. These themes can best be researched with participatory approaches involving collaborations with young adults in different life world-settings.

We live in ‘a lonely century’¹ in which loneliness has grown to worrisome proportions. Loneliness can be considered a ‘wicked problem’² that resists both a definitive problem definition and solution. Research vocabularies of loneliness vary, however, there is agreement that loneliness is about an experienced lack in a person’s social connections. While loneliness might result from social isolation, it is often related to the quality of social connections. The oft reported ‘loneliness in a crowd’ illustrates that loneliness is also experienced by people who are surrounded by friends and close family.^{1,3} Moreover, researchers distinguish different types of loneliness: social (lacking friends or family), emotional (lacking emotional intimate support), existential (feeling lost about one’s own existence and place in the world) and collective (feeling alienated from communities or society).^{4,5}

Loneliness is not always a problem: it is also a quintessentially human experience that can be meaningful in a person’s development, for example in transitions to adulthood when young people move to new social and institutional settings for education, work, or other types of change in their lives. Nevertheless, some forms are harmful and recent statistics about increasing loneliness among young people are alarming.⁶ The term ‘lonely century’ indicates that loneliness should be approached as a societal problem rather than something of specific individuals or groups. This societal character has implications for the question of what perspectives are needed for understanding and addressing it.

The predominant public health approach to loneliness is characterized as individualistic. Professionals have developed interventions to alleviate loneliness, by supporting life skills of individuals to increase the quantity or quality of relationships by creating more opportunities

for social encounters, and by changing ‘maladaptive cognitions’.⁷ Feng & Astell-Burt critiqued these individualizing approaches⁸ and defined loneliness as a collective and environmental issue. They proposed an environmental conceptual model that enables the identification of environments that discourage social encounters as ‘lonelygenic’. This environmental-model orients research to investigate public space, housing, social inequalities and exclusions, to consider and intervene in multiple causal pathways to optimize social encounters and to reduce loneliness. This focus on environments should not be confused with a focus on ‘collective loneliness’ which denotes a very specific experience of alienation. Lonelygenic environments give rise to different varieties of loneliness including intimate emotional loneliness and ‘loneliness in a crowd’ as they may hinder openness, support, creativity or empathy in social and emotional interactions between people. Lonelygenic environments thus affect both quantity and quality of social relations.

We support this approach to loneliness as an environmental issue and propose a participatory philosophy to develop a better understanding of loneliness and connectedness in different societal settings. Focusing on young adults, we discuss our understanding of three environmental conditions of the ‘lonely century’; how participatory research with young adults can promote collective learning about loneliness and connectedness under these conditions; and how public health researchers may contribute.

We propose that the focus of environmental interventions should not be on individual skills, talents or cognitions but on the role that various social infrastructures play in enabling high quality social connections in transitions to adulthood. Klinenberg (p.5) defines social infrastructure

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as the ‘interconnected physical spaces and organizations that shape the way people interact’.⁹ Places such as schools, libraries, parks, neighborhood centers enable interactions between people across social divides. During the last decades, neoliberal transformations of landscapes, cultures and technologies have led to an impoverishment of these social infrastructures. First, the commercialization of public space and dismantlement of meaningful meeting-places in many parts of the world created neoliberal landscapes in which public meeting places – neighborhood centers, libraries and parks – closed down or became neglected. This exacerbated the exclusion of disadvantaged youth, undermining their sense of place and belonging.¹⁰ Second, neoliberal cultures have cultivated competitive interactions at the cost of solidarity and empathic connections between people. The ‘tyranny of merit’ makes people believe that they deserve their place in society because of a lack of individual talents.¹¹ People exposed to competitive neo-liberal ideologies experience more loneliness, have a lower sense of connection to others, and perceive themselves to be in constant competition.¹² Third, the highly increased engagement with media technology and social media has come at the cost of meaningful connections to people physically present, fragmentation of attention, and difficulty in developing a sense of connection and place.¹³ Moreover, the competitive meritocratic zeal is amplified in the dynamics of constant comparisons of oneself and others in social media and phenomena such as Bomp: belief that others are more popular.^{1,5} In this context young adults can simultaneously be hyper-connected and experience intense loneliness. While many authors state that solitude does not imply loneliness it may also be true that some solitude can prevent loneliness.

Expanding this research on the societal challenges that young adults face, we propose to study loneliness concerning three themes: landscapes, symbolic spaces, and digital placemaking. These three themes are crucial to gain better insights into contexts and experiences of loneliness but also in strategies to improve social infrastructures and alleviate loneliness. They focus on meaningful losses or enrichments in the life worlds of young adults and their ways of connecting. As it is crucial to examine these themes from different disciplinary and situated perspectives, they cannot be researched with typical public health approaches using standardized methods and validated questionnaires.¹⁴ The call for shared definitions and measurement-instruments suggests that loneliness can be monitored and addressed by health and knowledge institutes, however, to understand experiences of loneliness in the contexts of digital, physical, social and symbolic connections and disconnections we need diverse and situated perspectives of young adults and people working with young adults.

First, we need participatory research that situates the loneliness of young adults in the landscapes of physical and digital environments that enable them to connect to others in their transitions to adulthood. Young adults in different social settings are best placed to examine what environments support meaningful ways of connecting and where they feel lonely. It is important to identify how impoverishments of social infrastructures are distributed and affect groups and social settings in different ways. How do they work out for young adults from rich and poor areas, urban and rural communities, different educational, work or drop-out settings, different experiences with ability and disability or chronic disease, and different migration backgrounds? In landscapes with difficult social terrains, loneliness can be part of a trade-off. For example, young adults with a migration background navigate different socio-cultural settings. Research indicates that experiences of exclusion and loneliness may also be a price that they pay for ideals of integration and participation.¹⁵

Second, we need participatory research to analyze symbolic spaces of loneliness: how are lonely experiences shaped in connection with cultural resources such as films music, poetry, social media, and books? How do young adults relate their own (lack of) connectedness to surrounding coming-of-age narratives and stories of friendship, love, community, success and failure? Competitive neoliberal ideologies form part of the narrative environment of loneliness,¹⁶ telling young people

that they are in constant competition and that they are responsible for their future. However, it is crucial to also explore more enriching and diverse vocabularies in which loneliness is expressed or observed. In their collaboration with youngsters in research about loneliness, Batsleer and Duggan for example, worked with a music-list, and discussions about novels and philosophical literature to examine themes connected to loneliness.¹⁷ This enabled them to explore how loneliness is connected to valued and meaningful life events and transitions, when it becomes painful and problematic, and how dominant cultural repertoires of the ‘Loner’ work to stigmatize and individualize loneliness.

Third, it is important to study (digital) placemaking initiatives by young adults. With placemaking in physical and digital environments, people shape their public realm and support a sense of connection and belonging.¹⁸ While placemakers focus on specific places they also work on the infrastructural connections to other places and organizations, and by creating more lively, inclusive, and healthy places they also enrich social infrastructures. For the current generation of young adults, a sense of place and belonging is mediated not only through social-physical infrastructures but also by digital environments. While the harms of social media have been researched extensively it is vital to also get more insight into the potentials of digital placemaking in enabling connectedness and alleviating loneliness. Digital placemakers embrace goals that are similar to traditional placemaking oriented at improving public space to make it more inclusive and supportive of well-being and health.¹⁹ Digital placemaking creates hybrid space(s) and can interact with physical spaces in enriching ways. For example, it may share place-related narratives, and multiple belongings and identities.²⁰ Digital placemaking may also help to shape environments in which young adults examine their sense of loneliness and what it means in transitions to adulthood.

While health institutes do not have a central role in understanding and addressing these loneliness themes, it is vital to also examine these from health perspectives. How are public health institutes situated in impoverished social infrastructures? How do public health narratives of loneliness shape symbolic space for example by identifying ‘at risk groups’ for loneliness, and how can public health institutes support (digital) placemaking initiatives? We support the viewpoint in The Lancet editorial that loneliness needs attention from all of society.²¹ Moreover, we underline the approach proposed by Feng & Astell-Burt of loneliness as a collective problem of environments that disable encounters characterized by empathy, solidarity, and other supportive social qualities. We should not target, problematize or medicalize ‘lonely people’ but build a research base about lonelygenic environments that vary from place to place. We propose that such research should not focus on finding consensus on definitions or standardized interventions, but rather on a better understanding of social environments and diversity. Loneliness of young adults is best understood with participatory approaches to science and public health that engage young adults not only as respondents but also in agenda-setting, collecting and analyzing data, and supporting initiatives to enrich social infrastructures. Thereby, we can establish how loneliness relates to existing social infrastructures. This participatory and socially situated philosophy enables collective learning about connectedness and loneliness and different responses to the challenges that young people face nowadays.

Author statements

Ethical approval

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Competing interests

We have no competing interests to declare.

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