YOUNG & LONELY: The Social Conditions of Loneliness

Janet Batsleer & Dr James Duggan

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<2> Notes on the authors

Janet Batsleer (Faculty of Education, Manchester Met University) is a Reader in Youth and Community. Her research focuses on the development of critical perspectives in informal learning, particularly in youth work. She has a particular interest in 'putting theory to work' in relation to the socio-cultural educative project of community-based learning. She draws on contemporary and historic feminist and anti-racist theory. She is interested in the dialogue between UK based work and European traditions of social pedagogy and socio-cultural animation. She supports action research linked to local projects as a way of developing these critical interests.

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<2> Preface/Acknowledgements

This book presents the youth co-research from the *Loneliness Connects Us* project, which ran from October 2016 to July 2019. This was a collaborative research project between academics at Manchester Metropolitan University and 42nd Street, a Manchester charity specialising in support to young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties/emotional distress. The Co-op Foundation funded the research as part of its strategic engagement with youth loneliness, and the research informed its Belong network.

We would like to acknowledge and share our gratitude with all those who contributed to making *Loneliness Connects Us* such a wonderful project. At 42nd Street, Simone Spray (CEO), Karina Nyananyo, Tess Gregson, and Julie McCarthy (Creative Director) were instrumental to developing and delivering the work. It was a privilege to work with the 14 youth co-researchers whose ideas and insights are presented in this book. Hwa Young Jung, Mark Carrigan, Ransack Theatre, and our youth artist Felicity led sessions on DIY making, social media, immersive theatre, and cartoon drawing. Tricia Coleman and Jana Wendler were commissioned to design and perform the immersive theatre piece Missing. Jane Hollington was the actor playing the Chief Super Intendant. We toured 'Missing' in sites across the United Kingdom, which would not have been possible without the support of West Rhyl Young People's Project, MAP Norfolk, N-Gage 360 Ballymeena, Fairbridge/The Prince's Trust, Glasgow. Thanks also to Ruth Coglan at MSV Housing, Kemoy Walker from Kyso, Nikki Woods and PLANT for their help in developing the legacy project. Finally, we would like to thank the 200+ young people who took the time to engage with this project and share their personal and sometimes painful experiences of loneliness.

We talked to and worked with a lot of young people and adults across the *Loneliness Connects Us* project, and an orientating idea to understand how we could relate and

communicate these many voices was polyphony. As opposed to cacophony or symphony, which are discordant and harmonised musical arrangements, polyphony is music with two or more voices or themes that are distinct within a work. It is this respect and attempt to hold but not simplify or reconcile the diverse perspectives of the many young people we met and talked to that was a firm commitment for us throughout the project and in this writing.

JB & JD

<1> Chapter One: Animate, Attune, Amplify

This book reports and reflects on the *Loneliness Connects Us* youth co-research project (2016-2018). In 2016, the Co-op Foundation funded the project as the first significant participatory inquiry into youth loneliness. The aims of the research were to animate, attune to and amplify the insights of youth co-researchers on youth loneliness. Then, grow these conversations into a dialogue with an emerging national discussion on youth loneliness. This chapter outlines the theoretical and practice-based resources in which the research was grounded.

Loneliness and youth loneliness have been a focus for study across the millennia and the academe, spanning the arts, philosophy, literature and poetry, politics, psychology, sociology, medicine and public health. There is not space here to review the various fields that contribute to better understanding loneliness in anything like sufficient detail. It is important to recognise that thus far the psychological research is incredibly influential in the youth loneliness agenda. Throughout the book we will engage with key insights from psychology but also identify limitations and biases for thinking about and intervening in young people's experience of loneliness. We do not think that any particular academic discipline or field of study holds dominium over the study of loneliness, and so we join calls for interdisciplinary research to better understand youth loneliness (Qualter et al. 2018).

In particular it is the participatory or co-produced turn to understand youth loneliness with and from the perspective of young people that poses exciting possibilities and troubling challenges for research in this subject. The shift to understand loneliness from the perspective of young people is to acknowledge that 'youth' and 'loneliness' are categories that we apply to make sense of incredibly complex, emergent and social events and experiences. Youth loneliness relates our thinking to young people that are neither just lonely nor just young. We make the case for acknowledging that our lives are filled with meaning, riddled with shame and guilt, inspired by hope and imagination, and much richer and worthwhile for it.

It is by working with young people and developing the research as they reflect on their feelings of loneliness but also as they look at the communities and society they live in, the future they hope for or are afraid of, that an inquiry into, for example, the relationships with

community and the intensity of loneliness emerges. It is in beginning with shared life experiences and biographies that our focus extends beyond analytical categories of normative or social loneliness to consider loneliness within the richness of the lives young people are living and would wish to live. It is in attending to these complex and emergent relationships that we have been able to disentangle the paradox of 21st loneliness: how people can be lonely in a crowd (Turkle 2011), isolated amongst abundant potential connection.

This chapter outlines approaches to understanding youth loneliness, and the project's intellectual and practice base in youth work, before providing a structure of the book.

<2> What is loneliness?

Loneliness is subjective, something that is perceived and felt, rather than simply a description of or the experience of being alone. In the classic definition from psychology, loneliness is defined as the negative emotions that accompany a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations (Perlman & Peplau 1981). Prominent loneliness scholars Cacioppo, Fowler, and Christakis (2009) define loneliness as *perceived* social isolation. For an objective measure of a lack of connectedness, as in someone living in a remote area and having few to zero human interactions, we describe this as social isolation (Victor et al. 2000). De Jong-Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra (2016) locate social isolation on a continuum from social isolation to social participation; where social isolation is defined as, 'Persons with an absence or a small number of meaningful ties are, by definition, socially isolated.' Although isolation and loneliness are linked it does not necessarily follow that isolated people will feel lonely or that people who are surrounded by others will not feel lonely.

Experiences of loneliness can be intensely painful. Evolutionary understandings of human behaviour popular in psychology teach us that loneliness represents an adaptive drive for individuals to reconnect with other people (Cacioppo & Patrick 2009). The human body feels social pain and physical pain in overlapping neurological and physiological responses (Riva, Wirth & Williams 2011). Thus loneliness is a form of social pain that creates a drive to action to increase the quantity or quality of social connection, as physical pain motivates us to move, hunger to eat, and thirst to drink (Cacioppo et al. 2011).

Loneliness is in part an abjected and stigmatised state. It is prudent to acknowledge there is still debate amongst academics as to whether we have sufficient evidence to claim that loneliness *is* stigmatised and stigmatising (Qualter et al. 2018). There are, however, powerful social and psychological pressures to appear socially successful, and loneliness is thus something that young people, like others, may seek to hide or deny, and find difficult to talk about. Furthermore, researchers have identified maladaptive social cognition in people experiencing loneliness, which is a tendency for lonely people to appear anti-social, as they misunderstand social cues and are awkward in social interactions (Cacioppo & Hawkley 2009). Since loneliness is the discrepancy between actual and preferred social connection, researching loneliness may involve asking someone to confront this difference between their life as it is now, how they would prefer or need it to be, and the constrained capacities for change (e.g. Zipin et al. 2015). Researching loneliness, therefore, requires considerable care to be ethical, safe and productive.

<2> The project's intellectual and practice base

The account of loneliness thus far is derived from research in psychology but our approach to the *Loneliness Connects Us* project was that no single discipline is capable of adequately engaging with such a diverse subject as youth loneliness. To be able to hope to understand youth loneliness in an appropriate context required analyses of psychology and epidemiology but also readings in youth studies, politics and sociological discussions of the effects of the austerity regime or precaritised work, and the young people's use of the Internet and social media technologies. More important still was the ways in which the youth co-researchers could be critically introduced to the diverse ways in which loneliness is understood. This involved both discussions of research findings and statistics and insights into loneliness from, for example, the diaries of the pioneering modernist Virginia Woolf. Giving coherence to this plural approach, however, were a series of intellectual and practice commitments emerging from youth work.

<3> Youth work

Loneliness Connects Us was deeply grounded in critical radical democratic traditions of youth and community work, understood as a practice of non-formal or informal education, association and socio-cultural animation (Batsleer 2008; de St Croix 2016). The research was grounded in a series of practices for working with young people, including critical

participatory action research and creative co-produced research (Fine 2016; Bell & Pahl 2018), understandings of youth work methods as socio-cultural animation and accompaniment (Batsleer 2008), socially engaged arts practice (Bishop 2012; Boal 1995), and various feminist and social movement activist practices for listening and attuning to one another across and united by difference (Lorde 1984; bergman & Montgomery 2017). The forms of knowledge (co-)produced through such processes, however, are necessarily unruly, as the intention is to include those that do not count and have no part in the discussion, working to make the invisible visible and the inaudible heard in conditions of equality (Ranciere 2010).

The theoretical orientations of the research followed recent developments in critical practice in grassroots youth work. So, for example, starting where young people *are* and negotiating an agenda for practice is a key principle of youth work. Programmes of youth work are characteristically developed out of conversation with the group and through an analysis of the social conditions prevailing in the area. Youth work methods are characterised by activity, association, and challenge: 'learning together by doing' and so the offer of opportunities to take part in drama, and art and craft activities, and making radio programmes, as well as more traditional research activities made sense. The research methods can be accounted for in a variety of ways but they flowed easily from a practice which has often been aligned with critical participatory action research. It has used its own version of creative auditing, using creative activities and time away on residentials and the tour to enable a deeper listening to and engagement with the lives of young people, in order to offer support to their increasing capacities.

<3> Partnerships and association

A continual set of concerns throughout the project was how we could ethically and productively invite young people to explore what loneliness meant to them. In line with youth work practice, we worked through association and partnerships, all of which emerged from the strong network of youth and community work academics and practitioners in Manchester and the United Kingdom.

We developed the research in partnership with 42nd Street, a youth mental health and well-being organisation in Greater Manchester that specialises in arts and social action practices as part of a holistic offer to young people. This was important because we wanted to

develop a project infrastructure that attended to a politics of space, and the necessary conditions of welcome, care and support required to co-produce research with young people (Bell & Pahl 2018). Locating the research in a youth mental health organisation was significant as engagements with loneliness could be traumatic. As an ethical commitment we wanted the young people to be able to access pastoral and counselling support within the project infrastructure and not signpost them to youth mental health services, as there might be significant waits for a referral and service delivery.

With some young people these encounters would last the duration of the project but for many others these interactions would be brief, yet still asking them to reflect on potentially difficult feelings. As part of the research we developed and toured a play called 'Missing.' It was performed in Rhyl, Ballymena, Glasgow, Great Yarmouth and Manchester each time in partnership with an existing youth work project, to locate these conversations within existing relationships of care and support between the young people and a youth worker.

<3> A transdisciplinary approach

The *Loneliness Connects Us* research was animated and enriched through an engagement with the multiple traditions and disciplines of youth work research and practice. Youth work has always worked within a trandisciplinary approach in the intellectual resources on which it draws and so was eminently suited to the overarching concern to understand loneliness within its properly social context. The book draws throughout on the wider sociological discussions of 'youth', the transdisciplinary project of Women's Studies, and on many themes widely discussed in education research on social pedagogy. Two disciplines in particular have been influential in Youth Work and on the project: sociology and education. The theoretical analysis which informs each section draws on some key ideas which we introduce briefly below and in the introduction to each section there is further discussion of these key theoretical framings. At this point we simply want to introduce some of the key thinkers and concepts which frame the subsequent analysis:

The first section of the book concerns the social conditions of loneliness. We introduce key sociological analyses relating to the natures of poverty, community, and the education system. An important theme which runs throughout the book is that of the impact of social abjection and 'shame'. The idea of social abjection is introduced in Chapter Three on ***Loneliness & Poverty*** and then recurs throughout the book. The whole analysis here is

deeply indebted to the work of Imogen Tyler (2013, 2020), whose whole rethinking of how social subjects are now being formed in conditions of neoliberal capitalism, is of first importance. From *Revolting Subjects* to *The Stigma Machine*, Tyler has demonstrated how the powers of classification mobilised through media discourses and social experience conjoin in the production of social disgust and shame, and how the populations who are the subjects of such discourses respond.

Tyler's work involves a recasting of an earlier feminist discussion of the role of emotion and affect in the subjection or oppression of women. She takes key psychoanalytic concepts and works with them sociologically to enable a sharper understanding of how powerful affects shape the experience of oppression. And her work is just one of the feminist framings which we draw on in this book.

The second section of the book mobilises well-established feminist discussions of the nature of 'the normal', which began with Judith Butler's (1990) unsettling of gender as a taken-for-granted heteronormative system in her *Gender Trouble*. A good deal of the empirical material presented in the book reflects on both the loneliness associated with being normal and the loneliness associated with being different, and so the analysis of the processes by which norms are established and unsettled, which has been a key project of feminist and queer theory, has been valuable. Audre Lorde's inspirational affirmations of difference as a source of creativity and knowing, in the face of the distortion of difference in the service of division, violence and control provide an essential entry point into the perspectives broadly understood as Queer Theory.

In the final section, the significance of theorisations drawn from the field of education and specifically the broadly understood field of community education comes to the fore. In fact, there is a rich vein in theorisations of community education in the UK which focus on youth work. It is indeed only now belatedly being recognised how much these discussions have in common with the discussions of social pedagogy, rooted as they are in ideas of social education (Batsleer 2013). The discussion of friendship as a practice has clear resonance with Mark Smith's work on friendship in Informal Education; the discussion of socio-cultural animation and creativity resonates with Batsleer's earlier work in particular but also the emerging writing which has inspired the *Creative Margins* network (Sim 2019); and the question of supporting expanded notions of community and solidarity resonates with

current theorisations of community development (Emejulu 2011). But here the theories that are being put to work are also emergent, reaching for new languages adequate to the task, including those developing as part of new materialist research projects in our own Research Institute.

Finally, we have been inspired by current work in the Humanities which is exploring the question of solitude, and although it is loneliness rather than solitude which is central here, it has been impossible to write and think about one without the other. Conversations with Sara Maitland have been generative here and we look forward to the findings of Professor Barbara Taylor's research project 'Pathologies of Solitude' which exemplifies this final important context for our work.

<3> Amplifying the research

The research was funded with the explicit intention to develop youth co-research into loneliness and then to share these insights to help young people and the practitioners that work with and for them navigate experiences of loneliness. Part of the rationale for conducting co-produced or participatory research is that working to understand an issue with the affected communities creates insights and recommendations that are more relevant and useful (Matthews et al. 2017). A core part of the process for the *Loneliness Connects Us* co-research was thinking about ethical and productive forms of encounter to enable young people to critically reflect on what it means to be lonely. Yet as these conversations multiplied and the project's insights grew, we were tasked with the challenges of how to mobilise this knowledge. Through the project we sought a balance between more traditional forms of research impact activity (e.g. speaking to the media, hosting events, making presentations to policy makers) with approaches that engaged with emerging ideas around the importance of feeling and experiencing loneliness through, for example, immersive theatre. The project's engagement with amplifying the research is found throughout the book. For example: Chapter 2 outlines the research's expansive approach, growing from one-to-one engagements to touring a performance and hosting a youth summit. Chapter 10 describes the legacy project to help young people deal with FOMO. Chapter 13 details the translation of the emerging findings into Missing an immersive theatre piece.

<2> The structure of the book

This introduction – Chapter 1 ***Animate, Attune, Amplify*** – has outlined the project's approach to the research. Chapter 2 ***Finding Oneself a Loneliness Agenda*** presents the policy context for the youth loneliness agenda and the emerging national conversation in which we hoped to amplify the contribution of the youth co-researchers. Chapter 3 ***I'm New Here*** explains our focus on youth and transition. We detail the carousel of moving methods that enabled us to work with the youth co-researchers through an iterative and expansive engagement with loneliness in different forms, modalities, spaces and practices.

The chapters in Section 1 describe ***The Social Conditions of Loneliness*** exploring the specific social conditions of inequality that make access to social opportunities and social connection difficult. Chapter 4 ***Loneliness and Poverty*** locates this discussion within the broader context of austerity, poverty, inequality and the pervasive impacts on young people's social and emotional lives. Chapter 5 ***Being an Outsider*** focuses on the ways 'outsider' positions are constructed, which help to constitute the social conditions of loneliness in different places and spaces. In chapter 6 ***The Education System, Aspiration and Loneliness*** we relate youth loneliness to the ways in which the individualisation of education and aspiration has contributed to senses of isolation and failure. Furthermore, it is these discourses of success and resilience that can make it so difficult for young people to admit they are struggling and to access support.

The chapters in section 2 ***The Experience of Loneliness*** discuss what we learned during our youth co-research project about young people's experiences of loneliness. Chapter 7 ***Transitions*** explores everyday moments and transitional events – moving school, breaking up, starting work – and how they relate to feelings of profound if often transient loneliness in the lives of young people. We consider both what psychologists call 'normative' loneliness in addition to the loneliness created for those defined as different and isolated by the exclusionary power of normativity. In Chapter 8 ***Loss, Grief and Loneliness*** we move to look in depth at some of the most extreme and difficult experiences associated with loneliness. Chapter 9 ***Being Left Out*** presents the experience of being left out and other experiences of not fitting in from a variety of perspectives. In chapter 10 ***Online Spaces and Connection*** we question the simplistic and deterministic relationships between youth

loneliness and social media, to explore the creative but also oppressive ways in which Internet technologies are woven into the fabric of collective and individual lives.

In section 3 ***Building friendship and connection*** the chapters reflects on the various forms of creativity enacted by young people and available to those that work with and for them. Chapter 11 ***Asking for Help and Offering Connection*** focuses on the creative strategies young people find to establish and sustain connection and mutual support. We also explore the complexity of asking for help and giving and receiving it at a time in life when a growing independence is prized above everything. Chapter 12 ***Youth Work as a Method*** describes the ways in which youth work practices and settings were crucial to the youth co-research, and also how youth work has become integral to the broader response to the youth loneliness agenda. In chapter 13 ***Creativity and Solidarity as Method*** relates the ways in which the project developed 'Missing', an immersive theatre performance from the emerging findings of the youth co-research. We explore the ways in which creativity and performance are foundational to experiences and relations of solidarity, activism and mutuality. Chapter 14 ***New Ways of Thinking and Relating to Loneliness*** concludes by presenting a series of recommendations for research, policy, practitioners and young people to begin to build more convivial communities in which it is okay to enjoy solitude and where all young people have access to the material and social conditions to reduce unwanted experiences of loneliness.

<1> Chapter 2: Finding oneself a loneliness agenda

Youth loneliness is an issue that evidently has come of age. It is nevertheless a puzzle that in the twenty-teens we are concerned that arguably the most connected generation in human history is struggling with loneliness and social isolation. Yet this seems to be the case.

Alongside the interest in elder loneliness, the response to youth loneliness has been a textbook case for anyone hoping to promote, advocate or agitate to get traction and action on a public policy issue. Internationally, public health officials, researchers and the media claim we are facing a loneliness epidemic (Murthy 2016; Holt-Lunstadt 2017; Easton 2018; Howe 2019). In the UK, we have seen a range of charity reports and strategy documents on loneliness (Griffin 2010; Kantar Public, Red Cross & Co-op 2016), the creation of dedicated funding programmes (e.g. Co-op Foundation's *Belong* network; DCMS and Co-op Foundation's *Spaces to Connect* programme), a government strategy document, and an international first in the appointment of a 'minister for loneliness' (DCMS 2018). Nevertheless, this book is in part a call to a pause and rethink the youth loneliness agenda as can be evidenced through a key features of the emerging national conversation.

The second part of the research's aim was to amplify the voices of young people in this conversation about youth loneliness. There is not space to tell the complete story of the rise of youth loneliness as a high-profile media and policy concern. Instead, we will explore a series of trends and milestones that emerged through a number of contingent events, with a view to creating a more unsettled and open way of thinking about young people and loneliness. This chapter therefore outlines the features of the loneliness agenda with sections on why youth loneliness now and troubling the youth loneliness agenda in relation to neoliberalisation and austerity, contagion and crisis.

<2> Why youth loneliness now?

A question we returned to throughout the research was, why youth loneliness *now*? What does thinking of loneliness illuminate or obscure in the contemporary experience of young people? Academics or practitioners are only too grateful to be working on an issue that enters the spotlight with the associated funding. We often fail or cannot afford to question why everyone is suddenly paying attention. So: Why youth loneliness now?

For the last decade in the United Kingdom, an increasing number of organisations that work with and for young people published research and strategies relating to youth loneliness. In 2009, in a report on the importance of transitions to youth well-being, Action for Children (2009) surveyed 500 young people and found 25% of 6-13 year olds and 25% reported feeling lonely. The Childline case notes reflect on the conversations the organisation has with young people that contact the service for confidential advice and support. The notes published in 2010 revealed that between March 2008 and April 2009, 9,924 children (6,385 girls and 3,089 boys) contacted Childline to talk about loneliness as a primary or an additional problem, which is 6% of all young people that year (Hutchison & Woods 2010). The Mental Health Foundation found that younger people (18-34 years) are more likely to be lonely than older people, with 12% feeling lonely often, 53% having felt depressed due to loneliness, and 14% had sought help due to feeling lonely (Griffin 2010). As part of its 'Five of the Future campaign', ACEVO (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations) published 'Coming in from the Cold' (ACEVO 2015). Although some aspects of their findings were nationwide, the report focused mainly on London. It suggested the idea of the 'grey zone' where loneliness progresses from an individual problem through a process of contagion to affect the community at large. In 2016, The Red Cross and Co-op Group commissioned 'Trapped in a Bubble' (Kantar Public, Red Cross & Co-op 2016) that found that 32% of 16 to 24 year olds were 'always/often lonely'. Despite this conflation of two potential categories the report presented a compelling case to attend to youth loneliness and in particular to loneliness affecting young single parents.

The shift to youth loneliness was foregrounded by anxieties about elder loneliness and the emphasis on loneliness as an intergenerational issue (e.g. Victor & Yang 2011), a focus on loneliness across the lifecourse (e.g. Jopling & Sserwnja 2016) and neighbourhood approaches to loneliness (e.g. JRF 2013). Loneliness was, at least in the UK, considered more of an issue of old age. The UK faces an ageing population and a funding gap in adult social care, with stark consequences for the quality of life for elderly people especially those living alone. Loneliness has found a significant place in this debate about ageing, informed by claims of the severe health effects of loneliness, worse as claimed than smoking 15-20 cigarettes a day (Campaign to End Loneliness 2019) – a claim drawn from a meta-analysis on social relationships and mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton 2010). In response a

number of national organisations developed campaigns and programmes of action, such as the *Campaign to End Loneliness*. Nevertheless, as part of these agendas, youth has emerged as a significant period of life in which loneliness manifests. Victor and Yang (2011) identified a nonlinear 'u' distribution of loneliness across the lifespan (16-105 years), with those under 25 and over 65 years old reporting the highest levels of loneliness. Qualter and colleagues (2013) extended this perspective to include young people aged 5-17 years old, identifying a prevalence of people feeling lonely sometimes or often 11%-20% for ages 12-15 years old and 20%-71% for ages 15-21 years old. This research focuses on loneliness in relation to particular life events and normative transitions as sources of loneliness, such as 'Lack of close friend, lack of romantic relationship, nonacceptance as possible mate' as explanation for loneliness amongst 15-21 year olds (Qualter et al. 2013:253).

The BBC Loneliness Experiment is the largest survey of youth loneliness yet undertaken, with over 55,000 participants over the age of 16 years old taking part, developed through a partnership between the BBC's programme 'All in the Mind', the Wellcome Collection and academics Professor Pamela Qualter (University of Manchester), Professor Christina Victor (Brunel University London) and Professor Manuela Barreto (University of Exeter). At the time of writing the results of the study are only available in a series of web pages and radio programmes (Hammond 2018a, 2018b; Manchester Institute of Education 2018). The findings tell us that 16-24 year olds feel lonelier than over 57s, 40% compared with 27%. People with more online only friends are likely to feel lonelier, as are people with higher levels of rated empathy. The study looks set to challenge accepted understandings of stigma and loneliness; although there is evidence that people feel ashamed of being loneliness, youth participants were more likely to say that they did not see other people feeling alone as something that was bad and stigmatising. Further, people who identified as LGBT or with lower socioeconomic status only felt lonelier if they felt discriminated against.

The scale of the BBC Loneliness Experiment means that its findings will shape what we know about loneliness for the next decade, yet we see ways in which the *Loneliness Connects Us* co-research can complement what is known. As an online survey there are acknowledged issues with self-selection bias, especially for completing a survey on the BBC website, possibly affecting the types of participant and the views about loneliness and, especially,

stigma. So there is space to explore these findings in relation to a more diverse series of methods, spaces and encounters between young people and loneliness.

As crucial as all these contributions have been, however, in our opinion loneliness and youth loneliness would not have come to such national prominence without the assassination of Jo Cox, Labour MP for Batley and Spen, on 16th June 2016. Her tragic and untimely death led to a global outpouring of grief and donations that created the Jo Cox Foundation to build Jo's legacy through a series of initiatives close to her life's work, nationally and internationally (Jo Cox Foundation 2019). The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was convened in January 2017, co-chaired by Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP, and supported by 13 charities. The Commission reported in December 2017 with fifteen recommendations at three levels, including a UK wide Strategy for Loneliness for all ages, a lead Minister for loneliness, a loneliness 'Family Test' for policy, and the development of an evidence base for policy (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness 2017). These recommendations were accepted and developed as part of the UK Government's 'A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness' (DCMS 2018).

Through the 2010s we have as a society remembered or become able to attend to the issue of youth loneliness, at root a realisation that times of transition and separation from who we were and who we are becoming – the very essence of youth – can be profoundly unsettling and painful. As powerful and persuasive the loneliness agenda has been in propelling the issue into a public policy response, as we approached the *Loneliness Connects Us* research we were troubled by particular aspects of the agenda.

<2> Troubling the youth loneliness agenda

The UK Government's response to loneliness received international acclaim for, for example, appointing the first 'minister for loneliness' yet there are persuasive reasons for caution. In particular, we question the neoliberalising and individualising policy and practice response within the austerity policy context, and descriptions of loneliness as an epidemic, social plague and crisis.

<3> Neoliberalisation and Austerity

In 2018, the UK Government released, 'A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness' (DCMS 2018). Reviewing the document it is apparent the strategy is written

within the familiar managerialising nomenclature. There are continual references to processes of 'rolling out', 'scaling up', 'innovating', 'iterating' and 'joining-up.' Innovation and its various cognate discourses and practices – social enterprise, social innovation, design thinking – are seductive in seemingly being able to solve any social problem (Selos & Mair 2012). Under the New Labour and subsequent administrations public and children's services have been the sites of transformative projects through collaboration, joined-up policy making and innovation (Clarke & Glendinning 2002; Davies 2009). This is not to claim that positive improvements are not possible or have not been made but profound social issues such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and youth loneliness persist, are exacerbated and emerge. There is a critique that such approaches are implicated in neoliberalising statecraft of extending market rationalities and strategies, and entrenching neoliberal reason as hegemonic common sense (Peck 2010).

Taking as an example a key component of this joined-up policy making for addressing loneliness, the 'Family Test' (DCMS 2018) compels policy makers to think of the consequences of any particular initiative in terms of the impact on loneliness. We may however question the weight which will be assigned to concerns related to loneliness. As the once 'minister for loneliness' Tracey Crouch MP (Minister for Civil Society) put it when questioned about the relationship between the loneliness test and decisions related to the austerity policy agenda:

> One of the things that we have outlined in the strategy is looking at a sort of policy test for loneliness … it's not to say that those cuts wouldn't happen but at least there would be an understanding of the consequence of those cuts… (Tracey Crouch MP cited in Stenning and Hall 2018:np)

The remarkable acknowledgement that austerity was pursued 'without an understanding of the consequence of those cuts', if only on levels of connection, contextualises the impact of the disinvestment in young people's lives and the capacities of the families, schools and communities that support them.

The government focus and investment on youth loneliness should be welcomed. It is not possible to calculate the investment in loneliness reduction strategies, as funding is spread between government departments, and national and local government or NHS Clinical

Commissioning Groups. We can identify £73.2 million of stated government expenditure on loneliness reduction that include young people, from a House of Commons Library Briefing Paper published on 5th August 2019 (Bellis 2019). This figure includes funding for a number of programmes that included but were not exclusively aimed at young people such as Building Connections Fund (£11m), the Community Minibus Fund (£25m), People's Postcode Lottery top-up grants (£5m), Health Lottery funding (£4m), 23 social prescribing projects (£4.5m), the DCMS and Co-op Foundation Spaces to Connect fund (£1.6m), and a Nesta 'Tech to Connect' Challenge (£1m). There is funding exclusively focused on young people with £100,000 for a Uniformed Youth Fund for research; £1 million invested in the Centre for Youth Impact; a £5 million fund to pilot social impact bonds for young carers who are at the risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training; and £6 million for two innovation programmes for care leavers. In addition we need to consider a series of projects such as a website for social prescribing and a DCMS campaign 'Let's talk Loneliness' (Bellis 2019).

The investment in youth loneliness must be understood, however, in relation to the massive disinvestment in public and youth services under the austerity regime, implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition and Conservative administrations since 2010. A few headline figures from the effects of austerity on youth and community services: Youth services have suffered a 73% reduction in funding by £1billion since 2010, with 14,500 youth and community workers cut since 2008, and 750 youth centres closed since 2012 (Labour 2019). Local councils have sold 12,000 public spaces (Davies et al. 2019 cited in Hitchin and Shaw 2018). In addition to the decrease in money available to fund services, there has been an expansion of need with increasing numbers of families and young people living in poverty, reliant on food banks, and living in inadequate housing. There has been a 40% decrease in early intervention services for young people, and 7% increase in late intervention (Action for Children, National Children's Bureau & The Children's Society 2017). On this pattern, there will be a £2billion funding gap for youth and children's services by 2020 (The Local Government Association 2017).

Neoliberalising processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2007), in the reduction in state funding for public services, were accompanied by processes of cultural governance in the abjection and stigmatisation of specific groups. In this book we follow a tradition of

research that brings to light the profound ways in which capitalism works to determine those that count and those that do not, and the pervasive forms of cultural governance that engender consent through blame, shame and making identities and ways of living abject (Tyler 2013; Jensen & Tyler 2015). These processes of exclusion and shaming are aimed at various groups at different types from 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' to 'gays' or 'chavs.' Being excluded and made abject may be accompanied by isolation and loneliness but it also speaks to the ways in which groups and individual are included or excluded based on characteristics such as gender, sexuality, race or forms of social achievement or its absence. In a society that reproduces hierarchies of winners and losers, loneliness might be seen and felt as a personal failure.

<3> Beyond the Individualisation of Loneliness

An important intersection between broader neoliberalising processes and youth loneliness research is the tendency to emphasise the individual. Neoliberalism(s) is famously an *ism* of the methodological, rational and utility-maximising *individual.* Of course, a focus on the individual occurs in conjunction with reforms to extend market dynamics, rationalities of competition, financialisation, and encroaching authoritarianism across society. We find in loneliness research, especially in the discipline of psychology, a broad concern with the individual. For example, leading definitions locate loneliness in individual and personal experience. For example, loneliness is,

'a situation experienced by *the individual* as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations in which a number of existing relationships is smaller than considered desirable or admissible or situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realised. Thus, loneliness is seen to involve the manner in which *a person* experiences and evaluates his or her isolation and lack of communication with other people.' (de Jong-Gierveld 1987: 120)

Returning to the BBC Loneliness Experiment, as the cutting-edge of psychological research on youth loneliness, the study asked participants for actions that lonely people could take to reduce or manage feelings of loneliness. The 9 strategies they identified are:

1. Find distracting activities or dedicate time to work, study or hobbies
2. Join a social club or take up new social activities and pastimes

3. Change your thinking to make it more positive

4. Start a conversation with anyone

5. Talk to friends or family about your feelings

6. Look for the good in every person you meet

7. Take time to think why you feel lonely

8. Carry on and wait for the feeling to pass

9. Invite people to do things without fearing rejection

Reviewing this list it is apparent that these actions are sensible but they all relate to the *individual*, what a lonely individual can do, rather developing broader and expansive ways of thinking about how we might collectively re-imagine our relationships of connection, and belonging, being alone and enjoying solitude. There is of course nothing essentially incorrect about thinking of loneliness through the lens of the lonely individual with a 'lack of (quality of) certain relationships.' However, as the youth of today are growing up in a society profoundly transformed and enmeshed in neoliberalising dynamics we need ways of thinking loneliness within and beyond neoliberalism and the emphasis on the individual.

Another concern is that research often explores individual loneliness through a series of constructs that relate youth experience, official discourses and/or psychological processes. Young people's experiences of loneliness are embedded within other official discourses concerning resilience or aspiration with, for example, loneliness amongst young homeless people said to be related to lack of resilience (e.g. Cleverley & Kidd 2011). Discourses and pedagogical programmes espouse resilience, character and grit which are no doubt common sense goods. Nevertheless they are implicated in neoliberalising agendas where the focus is to individualise social problems and responsibilise young people to overcome them (Burman 2018; Allen & Bull 2018).

Loneliness is understood in relation to psychological factors and effects such as hyper-vigilance (Qualter et al. 2013), maladaptive social cognition (Masi et al. 2011) and evolutionary drives such as the Re-Affiliation Motive which describes the adaptive drive to reconnect to social contact (Qualter et al. 2015). A significant focus of research on youth loneliness is to differentiate the triggers, risks and trajectories of loneliness amongst groups

669 of young people defined by characteristics such as living with autism (e.g. Zeedyk et al.
670 2016; Deckers, Muris & Roelofs 2017). Furthermore, psychological research separates
671 between normative loneliness – a transient form of loneliness associated with the expected
672 or normative transitions from childhood to adolescence and adulthood – and chronic
673 loneliness – where loneliness is a lifelong condition for approximately 8-10% of the
674 population (Victor & Yang 2011; Qualter et al. 2013). We are not so concerned to make this
675 distinction. If loneliness is normative, associated with a relationship break up or in moving
676 to a new town or job, it may still be experienced intensely as social pain and indeed may last
677 for years if not a lifetime. This focus on intensity aligns with developments in the field to
678 think beyond the focus on prevalence and frequency – is this the loneliest generation? – to a
679 focus on the intensity and duration of experiences of loneliness (e.g. ONS 2018).
680 Understanding young people's experience of loneliness through psychological constructs is
681 clearly useful but we aimed to look out from a youth perspective to unsettle and expand
682 these approaches.

683 ## <2> Loneliness as contagion and crisis

684 An alternative but equally problematic way of thinking of loneliness is to understand the
685 connections between people, the sharing and emergence of loneliness, in terms of
686 contagion and crisis. The idea that loneliness is contagious reflects the emotional contagion
687 thesis from the fields of psychology and social psychology. Emotional contagion describes
688 how,

689 '[T]he loneliness in one person contributes to or causes the loneliness in others. The
690 emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of loneliness may contribute to the
691 induction of loneliness... If loneliness is contagious, what if anything keeps the contagion in
692 check?' (Cacioppo, Fowler & Christakis 2010)

693 This quote captures the fears and anxieties emerging from the idea that loneliness is
694 contagious. What keeps *it* in check? In the words of leading international psychology
695 scholar, the late John Cacioppo,

696 'If you're lonely, you transmit loneliness, and then you cut the tie or the other person cuts
697 the tie. But now that person has been affected, and they proceed to behave the same way.
698 There is this cascade of loneliness that causes a disintegration of the social network.'
699 (Cacioppo 2009)

There is a concern in conceptualizing loneliness as emotional contagion and contagious: lonely young people become seen as vectors communicating loneliness amongst their social networks, as the mosquito is in the spread of malaria. Lonely young people who learn that loneliness is contagious may encounter the further feelings of shame, disconnection and doubt in not wishing to infect others with their loneliness and pain. Furthermore, young people might fear contact with potentially lonely young people lest they too *become* lonely. This approach to understanding loneliness creates an added layer of awkwardness and anxiety preventing young people from interpreting feelings of loneliness as a reminder to connect with others or indeed for other people to reach out and include them in social connection. In a more everyday sense, thinking of loneliness as contagion might interrelate to folk theories of social relations, such as the situation where popular young people do not want to be friends or seen with their uncool or unpopular peers because *uncool* is contagious.

The description of loneliness as a feature of prominent print and online media such as the BBC (Easton 2018), The Guardian (Khaleeli 2013), and Forbes (Howe 2019) all alert us to a loneliness epidemic. Rachel Reeves MP (Co-Chair of Jo Cox Loneliness Commission) defined loneliness as a 'new social epidemic' (Asthana 2017:np). According to the Dictionary of Epidemiology (Porta 2008:78-79), an epidemic is,

'the occurrence in a community or region of cases of an illness, specific health-related behavior, or other health-related events clearly in excess of normal expectancy.'

The declaration of an epidemic is a typically powerful response that determines a problem as significant and locates it within the domain of public health knowledge practices. Naming loneliness as an epidemic is useful for policy makers and organisations to illuminate the gravity of the issue and to warrant increased investment in loneliness reduction programmes. It is important to recognise that declaring an epidemic, a crisis or an emergency is not a neutral act. In 'Abnormal', Foucault reminds us of the power relations at work in the historical declarations of plague, which is,

'A political dream in which the plague is the rather marvellous moment when political power is exercised to the full… the reaction to plague is a positive reaction; it is a reaction of inclusion, observation, the formation of knowledge, the multiplication of

effects of power on the bases of the accumulation of observations and knowledge.'
(Foucault 1975:47-48)

As part of the loneliness agenda we have witnessed the apparently banal requests for new measures of loneliness and social connection. Further, after describing loneliness as 'a giant evil' of our time, Rachel Reeves MP calls for 'a new kind of welfare system that acts as a convenor, bringing people together to help them help themselves' (Asthana 2017:np). This is not necessarily problematic but Foucault's (1977, 1978) insights into the relationships between knowledge and power raise the question of how these might become yet more disciplinary regulatory apparatuses to transform young people into future citizens and workers in waiting (Rose 1999).

A corollary of loneliness as epidemic is the sense that we are amidst a crisis of loneliness. There are a series of superlative claims about the current state of youth loneliness. Britain was labelled the loneliness capital of Europe (Orr 2014). Young people are lonelier than any other generation (Hammond 2018a). No doubt this is a necessity of an increasingly competitive news context, in which journalists exaggerate the risks of diseases to attract attention. We might ask, however, whether or not we should care about the current cohort of lonely young people if the UK is only the fifth loneliest country in Europe, if the youth of a previous historical era were lonelier, or if 35-45 year old males are the loneliest of all.

Representing youth loneliness as an epochal crisis is a familiar discourse. Since the advent of industrialisation, however, youth and young people have been the focus of a series of moral panics (Cohen 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994) and crisis discourses. Crisis follows crises whether gangs and violence, youth fitness for the Boer war or more recently educational underachievement, obesity, eating disorders, radicalisation, youth mental health, and knife crime (Green 2017). However much describing loneliness as a crisis feeds column inches and pronouncements in the policy sphere, and so can be perhaps productive and necessary in the short-term, we know that the trajectory is for the issue to be superseded by subsequent crises.

Our commitment throughout the research was to think to animate, attune to and seek to amplify the voices of young people in this growing national conversation. As productive as the existing research and advocacy had been in catalysing media and policy interest in youth loneliness, we were keen to illuminate potential biases and ultimately counter-productive

tendencies in the loneliness agenda. Thinking of loneliness as individualising, contagious and crisis in neoliberalising contexts or, indeed, failing to challenge and provide alternative ways of thinking and relating to loneliness is limiting. We were committed to maintain an openness, thinking loneliness in relation to alternative discourses, practices and imaginings of the relationship between individuals, communities, public services and the government. To reproduce the new as the old, youth loneliness as yet another social issue to be resolved through established practices and strategies would be a profound mistake and a missed opportunity.

<1> Chapter 3: I'm new here: creating a new research project and a young person led research agenda

Gil Scott Heron's 2010 song 'I'm new here' was chosen by one of the young people we worked with for the 'Loneliness Playlist' we made at the start of the research. From then on, the old man's gentle voice and chords, which belong to the poet and musician Gil Scott Heron, accompanied the collaborative research project. It is poignant that this was an old man's voice saying 'I am new here.' The song takes the listener quickly to a sense of not knowing, which can be both a place of possibility and a lonely place. The old man is in a bar; he is alone; perhaps he has refused to change to fit in with a group, and has moved on. The listeners do not know, just as he does not know, and must ask for help to find out.

Whilst, as sociologists of youth claim, the lens of 'youth' does offer new insights into social relations, which are presented here, the underside of exploring this theme of 'newness' is a kind of uncertainty. This principle of 'not knowing' was an important accompaniment to the approaches to the subject of loneliness explored in this book, as such an agnostic stance pushes towards a deeper form of listening and engagement. This practice of uncertainty extended to not knowing ahead what value to place on the experience of loneliness, a consideration of the possibility that it might be pointing to something that is needed and that is of enormous value. Such uncertainty is an aspect of all relationality and yet it may be felt in particular ways when young. Loneliness may sing.

'Being New Here' took on a resonance beyond the experience of arriving new in a city or a bar. Everyone who gets to the age of 13 has never been 13 before. Everyone who reaches an age deemed 'adult' has never been adult before. This has been termed (and debated and

deconstructed) as ‘transition’ in the youth studies literature. Ageing and being new and making significant transitions continues to be the case throughout life, and there are a number of significant life transitions. Nevertheless, the moment of experiencing loneliness alone for the first time is a moment in which possible responses are also shaped for the first time. These responses, though experienced personally, are not formed merely individually but are the repertoire of a generation, accompanying that generation throughout life and extending and constraining the possible responses available to everyone. It has therefore been important to us to recognise wherever we can in what follows what is new and being added to our understandings of loneliness and connection, specifically through young people’s engagement with the theme. Because the theme of loneliness was at first identified as a concern in relation to elders, there is much new to hear and see here.

Key transitions associated with young people include: primary school/secondary school/college/University transitions; school/work transitions; leaving home/living independently transitions; dating/seeking/forming adult relationships transitions. If and when these ordinary and complex experiences are accompanied by difficulties that have persisted since childhood (especially from the earliest years) the likelihood of experiencing more than momentary loneliness intensifies. This intensification is also the case with forms of change or loss that can occur at any time of life, such as bereavement, parental separation or divorce, homelessness or moving home, change of schools, break up of relationships or friendships, or illness.

In this chapter, we explain the processes of collaborative and youth led research on which the book as a whole draws. We present the framing of a new research project by a group made up of academic researchers and young researchers who were experts through lived

experience. It was a project developed out of the traditions of critical participatory action research committed to social justice (Fine 2016) and informed by our understandings of youth work methods as socio-cultural animation and accompaniment (Batsleer 2008). This creative process of research underlies therefore both the qualitative findings about loneliness presented throughout the book and the uncertainty which accompanies them.

<2> A new research project

The project ran from November 2016 to July 2019, and developed through four phases: One, growing the research. We recruited 14 young people as part of the core research team, coordinated by a paid lead youth co-researcher who was employed by 42nd Street. Through the Carousel of Methods we explored loneliness and developed a co-research agenda for youth loneliness. Two, we continued the Carousel of Methods and experimented with methods for data collection. Three, two arts producers joined the project to develop 'Missing' an immersive theatre experience that was performed 15 times. Four, we explored the legacy transitions from youth co-research to youth social action by hosting a youth summit and developing the legacy project with young people on FOMO or the Fear of Missing Out.

In the first stage of the research, the core group of researchers for the project met on a weekly basis, getting to know one another as well as exploring and creating what would become the key research questions. During this phase of the research we workshopped and explored a number of philosophical and cultural resources and played with a series of possible approaches to the study. Some of these are presented in this chapter. The discussion was not limited to scientific evidence, though in an early session we shared our initial literature review with the research participants. We drew widely on the range of

sources which have been presented in the first chapter. The words of novelists such as Virginia Woolf (2003), Olivia Laing (2017) and Sara Maitland (2014), the theologian Paul Tillich (2010) and the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr (1989), also all made appearances in these workshops. At the same time, these early activities enabled the research team to become at ease with one another and with a potentially difficult topic. From the very beginning we built into this study the often-noted synergy (Gormally & Coburn 2016; de St Croix 2016) between methods used in group building in community education and youth work projects and the development of creative engagement as a practice of research and enquiry.

We developed and drew on a carousel of research methods. The idea behind this was to enable the whole research team to explore research and artistic practices that might develop a series of methods to enable conversations that matter with other young people about youth loneliness. The research team developed an iterative and expansive series of encounters, inquiries and dialogues with loneliness, through a series of practices. The first session focused on the practice of interviewing and practical research ethics. The second session shared some of our findings from the literature and used community philosophy (Tiffany et al. 2013) to encourage talking, listening, reflecting and thinking together. We then ran subsequent sessions on making DIY robots for 'parallel' or sitting-alongside conversations, explored loneliness together through ludic methods that moved the research out into the street, listened to music and discussed films that gave volume or voice to thoughts and feelings of loneliness, and met immersive theatre practitioners working on productions of short plays about loneliness. We co-produced two radio programmes, we ate together, we discussed research evidence and shared quotes from our sessions elsewhere, and we co-produced scenario-based workshops with other young people. There is not space

here to detail each of these interventions but the intention of the carousel was for the youth co-researchers to engage with different media, modalities, methods and methodologies that sought to open up different ways of encountering, thinking and experiencing loneliness.

A second element of the carousel reflected the changing relationships and locus of the project among the research team and the various points of entry and exit for young people to participate. We aimed to respect the differential participation of young people that participated as co-researchers throughout the project alongside more temporary and peripheral encounters as young people joined the project as an activity for university assignments, to 'hang out', or as *participants* in interviews, workshops or discussions following the performance of Missing.

In what follows we show some of the ways in which research questions were generated in the first months of the research that enabled us to probe more deeply into the experience of loneliness. We briefly present four of the methods we used. These are: a Robot Story Board; a Community Philosophy Discussion; a Street Walk at Dusk, and a Loneliness Play List.

<2> A robot story board

The research team began to explore playful methods in an early activity led by Hwa Jung Young, who guided us in the making of small battery driven robots, using ready to hand materials, in this case plastic water bottles and other junk materials. We worked in two teams to make the robots, and attached a small motor propeller to each of them, using felt tip pens. Then we sent them to do battle with each other, and in the process designed a game. This activity was based on one developed as part of games workshops in galleries and

museums education; it emphasises the active contribution of participants in design whilst showing the significance of binary choices and pathways which then engender and inspire creativity in such design processes.

This robot-making brought connections to the surface through a shared practical activity which most participants felt very at home with. In the two teams, the robots were created and named; it was from the point that they were inevitably sent to do battle with each other that the story of the lonely robot first emerged.

The creation of story boards is a staple of much socially engaged youth arts practice. The principle of narrative and scenario building came to underpin a great deal of the research process in this project and we will return to this theme in depth later in the book when we discuss the play 'Missing', which was created as an integral part of the project. Here, the story-making activity emerged from a principle of game design based on binary choices. The 'lonely robot' would move through a particular space making choices randomly (through the spin of the robot) at each point. In the case of this robot, the choice often became between one of seeking connection or seeking separation. The scene chosen was a local park, recently renewed and made habitable again, in an area where many people live in bedsits in what were once grand Victorian family houses and are now houses in multiple occupation. The choices faced by the character who moved through the game included: whether to leave a club late at night with a friend or to leave alone; whether or not to walk alone through the park at night; whether or not to buy pizza; whether or not to share it; whether or not to take it home to eat; whether or not to sit on a bench to eat it; and whether or not to accept someone else sitting on the bench or to move to another bench to sit alone.

The use of story-boarding and scenario building as a method has been recognised by socially engaged arts practitioners as allowing provisionality and a range of potential identifications for those taking part. Although there is a strong tendency – which can only be resisted if it is brought to awareness – to reproduce powerful cultural narratives and 'official' scripts, - skilful practitioners can bring alternative scenes and possibilities to light, with the possibility of new identifications and dis-identifications happening for those taking part. The robot story worked to distance the experience. No one involved was claiming to be a robot after all. Following the robot game, the research team developed a process of scenario building to invite stories about youth loneliness. A series of cards with potential young people involved (girl, aged 10; boy aged 17; and so on), some places (a school canteen, a club, a gym, a football match and so on), times (a birthday; Christmas; early in the morning; a weekend), and an object (a pair of headphones; a pair of trainers; a phone). With every iteration of the process, new ideas were suggested and included in the materials for scenario building.

The robot story resonated strongly with the experience of one of the research team who lived continually with night waking and would often choose to be alone in preference to being with others, including at times finding outdoor spaces safer than indoor spaces. This playful engagement allowed the pain associated with loneliness to emerge, but also the reality that loneliness may be hard but is not necessarily the hardest experience to be faced. It became clear that loneliness may cause anxiety and lead people not to seek support, ask for help or offer friendship, particularly when loneliness is aligned with issues of mental health and surrounding stigma. It was from conversations on themes such as these that issues of *Asking for Help and Offering Connection* took on significance for the research.

<2> Community philosophy

Sara Maitland (2014: 30) writes In *How to be Alone*, '…recently 'loner' has become media shorthand for 'psychotic mass murderer or sex fiend.' If you look up 'loner' on Wikipedia you will find this alphabetical list of related terms:

Avoidant personality disorder	*Hermit*
Autism	Hikkomori
Byronic hero	*Introversion*
Dysfunctional family	Loneliness
Lone Wolf (trait)	Social phobia
Major depressive disorder	Social rejection
Misanthropy	*Solitude*
Recluse	Tragic Hero
Schizoid personality disorder	

I have put into italics the four terms that do not correlate with 'sad, mad and bad', although the context of the list raises questions even about them.'

This was one on the stimulus materials we used for the Community Philosophy session.

An engagement with philosophical enquiry has been a consistent focus of the forms of conversation which youth and community workers have hoped to engage in (Young 2007) and there is synergy with current research preoccupations with ontoepistemology (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles & Rousell 2018), deep questions of value and purpose, and a commitment to share the terms and guiding principles of research with research

participants. Radical research practice has often been committed to enabling less powerful participants' critical knowledges to emerge, and there is a strong current emphasis on the significance of the non-verbal, the affective and the more than rational as vehicles of knowledge (Ivinson & Renold 2019). There are also a number of approaches in youth work to enquiry through dialogue which have been built from models of phronesis (Young 2007; Ord 2014) and Socratic Dialogue (Banks 2018), or which have taken ideas developed in the Philosophy for Children movement and adapted them for youth work (Tiffany et al. 2013).

The process of Community Philosophy involved an initial presentation and exploration of ideas concerning loneliness from a range of writers including poets, essayists, psychoanalysts and historians. The purpose of this session was to unsettle any taken for granted notions that we held concerning our existing knowledge, for example that we knew in a satisfactory way what loneliness was and why it was a bad thing. We considered the importance that has been assigned to solitude as a form of being in many discussions of creativity and spirituality, and questioned the stigma associated with loneliness. This theme has become central to our approach in this study. Solitude remains a very important resource; it is possible that loneliness can be thought of as a pathology of solitude, as Professor Barbara Taylor suggests in naming her research project 'Pathologies of Solitude.'

Following the unsettling of assumptions about what we know to be true, researchers were then invited to develop their own questions which were continually investigated in the following sessions. These were the questions which emerged: What good can come from loneliness? What do we owe others if we choose solitude? What does it mean to be sane in an insane society? What makes a good friend? How do we know that we feel the same as others when we feel lonely? Do you choose solitude or does solitude/loneliness get forced

on you? Why do we judge people for being alone? Is it better to be without friends and safe or with friends and vulnerable? Do people use their friends' social media or online forums as a substitute for physical interaction and does it work? Where does loneliness begin? Is this a friendship or do I still feel lonely? How can we tell if someone is a friend? Can you actually choose friends? Are ties and bonds of friendship natural rather than chosen?

The question '*Does loneliness connect us?*' became an overarching theme. It very rapidly became clear that it would be impossible to separate the discussion of isolation and connection from wide ranging social and political issues. Youth work traditions concerned with supporting young people's discernment about relationships and what enables flourishing are embedded in practices that encourage the widest possible questioning of social relations. This builds on the critical traditions of Participatory Action Research (Fine ,2016), whilst taking a distance from the ways in which those traditions and their associated technologies have become commodified. There are questions about the kind of threats which (young) people encounter and which cause isolation; about practices of distinction and judgement which place people outside of social acceptability; and about imagining the good grounds for connection, flourishing and friendship and the kind of social relations which enable and constrain this.

Youth loneliness needs to be considered within the broader context of how young people are growing up in conditions of austerity, precarity, inequality and the competitive pressure to achieve. Responding to youth loneliness means developing new forms of solidarity, belonging and friendship.

<2> A street walk at dusk

It was a December evening and the city was dark, although here in the centre of the city it is never dark and the streetlights give off an orange glow. Jana Wendler, an urban geographer and specialist in playful methods, supported the session with an introduction to walking as a method: walking and following according to a rule invented and agreed by the group who are walking together, noticing and then talking. This method was introduced to the group as one of a range of 'playful research methods' with which the research team can engage. There is a good deal of interest currently in our wider research community in the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University in both playful methods and in walking (Springgay & Truman 2019). These are seen as ways to unsettle and to open up aspects of experience that more word-centred methods occlude. Such research methods are familiar with the figure of the flaneuse/flaneur and the way they move through urban space and know it through movement. Less familiar perhaps is the youth and community work practice of detached work or street work. This is a good example of finding synergy between research approaches and established approaches to a professional practice, youth work, in which contact, connection and conversations are established on a voluntary basis, often in spaces which young people have chosen and defined as their own. Historically these were 'the streets' and instead of seeing youth work as a practice of 'getting young people off the streets', detached youth work stayed there with young people and at their invitation, and negotiated the terms of engagement with them. It is much harder now, under contemporary conditions of surveillance, to see the streets as a free space or to identify the spaces which young people claim as their own, away from the surveillance of adults, but the principal for practice remains significant: young people bring

1025 their own terms to the engagement and collaboration. They are not empty vessels, any
1026 more than is the researcher or youth worker.

1027 The team of researchers divided into pairs and each pair made a rule. For example, to follow
1028 from one light to the next one we saw. Or to always take a left turn. Having agreed their
1029 rules, the pairs followed them without talking and then, at the end of the time, returned to
1030 the project base and talked together about what they had experienced and how this
1031 connected to the theme of loneliness.

1032 As it turned out, it was a moment of connecting with the edges of experience. The project
1033 base is on a busy main road through the centre of the city, but it is also on the edge of a new
1034 housing development for young professionals, from which, notoriously, social housing
1035 tenants have been excluded. So we walked into darker spaces and into lighter ones, and
1036 noticed people in a supermarket, in a café bar, and through the enormous glass frontage of
1037 a Virgin Extra gym. We noticed other people shopping on their own or in pairs, at the gym
1038 alone on the cross trainer, and we imagined their lives in these mundane activities and
1039 talked about our own. We also noticed the time of day and wondered if the transitions
1040 between one kind of engagement in life and another were potentially lonely moments. We
1041 were caught up in wondering about time and loneliness and connection, the temporal
1042 rhythms not only of the day but of the year. We were doing this from the outside looking in,
1043 and feeling different. From this experience and others, we began to name and explore the
1044 way *a sense of difference* is present in this space. This began to open up a conversation
1045 about the many forms of *queer* and what they would contribute to the study.

1046 **<2> The loneliness play list**

1047 Green Day – Boulevard of Broken Dreams

Let Live – Copper Coloured Quiet

Deadmau5 & Imogen Heap – telemiscommunications

Bon Iver – Roslyn & Majid Jordan – A place like this

Gil Scot Heron – I'm new here

Radiohead – Creep

Ennio Morricone – Gabriel's Oboe

These were the tracks chosen and shared, at the suggestion of the younger researchers, which spoke to them of loneliness. As the conversation developed in the first phase of the research, ideas for sources of enquiry emerged in the course of conversation, and one of these was the loneliness play list. It was from this list that three important themes for the rest of the research process emerged.

One was the possibility of non-verbal expression of separation and connection. This was first heard in the tones of a solo oboe from the film track for The Mission, a 1986 historical epic film about a heroic Jesuit whose oboe playing at a moment of life threatening danger forms a connection with the indigenous South American people he has come to serve. Listening, in this early session, to the oboe playing alone out of a moment of despair and signalling a life-saving possibility of connection, and hearing the solo oboe's distance from the orchestra, resonated through many subsequent recognitions of a deep connection not best expressed in words.

The second important recognition was of the importance of new technologies and platforms. The research team consistently shared and engaged with a wider public on a range of platforms, including Twitter and on podcasts. The creation of this music playlist was

the first of a number of such compilations during the course of the project. We found that the use of sharing platforms – to discuss topics ranging from music tracks through musical theatre to superheroes, comedy, and DIY information – is a fundamental means of communication among young people.

Thirdly, the framing of 'loneliness' as a particular preoccupation at this lifestage was brought into sharp focus by the lyrical content of the chosen songs: romantic relationships, uncertainty about the future, both personal and planetary, bordering on depression and a sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness. This sense of the connection between loneliness and 'youth' came to be particularly encapsulated in the phrase 'I'm New Here' from the Gil Scott Heron song quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

<2> A youth-led research agenda

At the end of this initial period of building a research team, the following focuses and themes had therefore been identified to take into the second phase of the research. The following is how this was encapsulated in our research notes at the time made together at the end of a group session.

- **Being 13**: The transition from childhood to becoming a teenager can be awkward, when it is difficult to both relate to other young people and have conversations with adults.
- **I'm new here**: Transience is a feature of many young people's lives, whether that is moving schools or when families move or split up, or moving across countries and seeking asylum – all of which can exacerbate youth loneliness.
- **Being different/queer youth**: There are many forms of difference that can create vulnerability to isolation and loneliness and prevent a feeling of belonging. (In this

study, the issue of how this loneliness accompanies people exploring non-normative gender and sexuality was particularly highlighted and this enabled other ways that difference is picked on to emerge.)

- **Online spaces and connection**: Social media is implicated in discussions of loneliness and in broader experiences of being young. We recognise the pressures and constraints as well as the possibilities of social media for forming nourishing relationships.
- **Asking for help, offering connection**: Loneliness can make people feel awkward and anxious and may cause young people not to seek support, ask for help or offer friendship, particularly where loneliness is aligned to issues of mental health and the surrounding stigma.
- **The politics of loneliness and friendship**: We assert that youth loneliness needs to be considered within the broader context of how young people are growing up in conditions of austerity, precarity, inequality and the competitive pressures to achieve as an individual. We believe that responding to youth loneliness requires developing new forms of solidarity, belonging and friendship.

These themes were used to guide the enquiry and were supplemented by some broader concerns as the research developed:

- **Transitions**: This reflects the many painful stories of *first* transitions - the first relationship breakdown or the first time away from home - and how these can leave young people vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.
- **Trauma, shame and silence*:*** Loneliness is often accompanied and entangled in trauma, shame and silence, especially when young people are trapped in coming to

terms with a painful past and feeling fearful of contact with others or not worthy of present positive connections.

- **Questioning contagion*:*** We questioned the focus on contagion in popular reporting and analyses of loneliness, such as the use of the words 'plague' or 'epidemic' to describe youth loneliness.

The research project then moved into a period of wider engagement with young people across the North West of England. The following table shows the range of engagement the project had in the second phase of the research.

Table 1: Forms of youth engagement during phase two

Youth Group	Form of engagement	Numbers	Ages
42nd Street Core Group	Each One Teach One	15	11-25
42nd Street Groups	Individual Conversations	10	16-20
Stoke Youth Project	Group Scenario Building	6	10-12
Manchester Youth Club	Scenario Building	10	15-16
Youth Forum Manchester	Group Discussion	5	15-16
LGBT* Group	Scenario Building	8	16-24

In the important third phase (discussed in Chapter 12), we toured a play called 'Missing' in a variety of locations around the British Isles. 'Missing' was an immersive performance based on a 'missing persons' scenario, in which a young woman with an apparently ordinary life goes missing and participants who take part in the performance are given the task of finding her. Because of its importance it has a chapter of the book almost to itself, but it needs to be said here that this engagement with young people in each of the four jurisdictions of the UK greatly deepened and extended our understanding of loneliness. Many of the findings of the subsequent chapters and the shape of the current text (which is based on our project report) came into focus as a result of this experience of the immersive performance. The four youth projects that we visited (which are described in detail in Chapter 11) were in Rhyl, Norwich and Great Yarmouth, Ballymena and Glasgow. They could not have been more hospitable to our perhaps somewhat strange request to bring a play and discuss loneliness with them.

The fourth and final phase of the research was to develop a legacy project. We began working with the housing association assembly to explore how an inchoate youth state might engage youth loneliness. We started working with the new group of 12 young people prior to the conclusion of the research with the original group of youth co-researchers, to ensure there was sufficient continuity with the original research but opportunity for the new group to create a sense of contribution and ownership of the process they were inheriting. For example, they participated in an immersive performance of the play Missing and attended the *Loneliness Connects Us* youth summit. The housing association group decided to focus on online spaces and loneliness, and in particular FOMO or the 'Fear of Missing Out.' The *Loneliness Connects Us* research had explored the pressures imposed on

young people through an engagement with social media. The project is described in Chapter 9.

In subsequent chapters, the findings which emerged from these studies are presented. All of the original themes discussed earlier remain and can be found clearly responded to in particular chapters. The issue of the politics of loneliness and finding a new narrative for loneliness is addressed throughout.

Use of the carousel of methods means that the methods we used and the evidence we generated in this co-research project have taken multiple forms; in some the verbal and narrative forms of expression become foregrounded, and the work of co-production is evident. In others, the non-verbal and relational experience of the research process is to the fore: it has been a matter of attuning to loneliness and friendship, prior to any verbal expression. In this book, the emphasis is strongly on the voices and new narratives that the project generated, but we hope the affective impact of these creative methods can also be sensed in what follows.

<1> Section I: The social conditions of loneliness

The experience of loneliness and the accompanying movement from loneliness to the valuing of solitude was an aspect of the development of individualism in Modernity, and associated with Romanticism in particular. The most famous poem of the Romantic movement, Wordsworth's Daffodils, once learned by heart by children as a condition for being permitted to leave school, begins with loneliness - 'I wandered, lonely, as a cloud…' but ends with a 'flash upon that inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude.' So loneliness can be understood as a ubiquitous presence in modernity. But we are not concerned here simply with the loneliness which accompanies modern life and which can become, with properly artful or skilful attention, a practice of solitude. The rehearsal of this undoubted truth should not prevent the recognition that there are specific social conditions of inequality that make access to social opportunities and social connection difficult and loneliness more likely. The social conditions of poverty, of disconnected small towns and of competitive and individualistic education systems are the focus of the following three chapters and we argue that 'youth loneliness' cannot be addressed apart from an understanding of these conditions. Most discussion of loneliness has focussed on individual experiences of social isolation and the consequences of this for the personal experience of loneliness, such as the development of hyper-vigilance and the risks to mental health. However the significance of poverty as a theme meant that our starting point instead became the social conditions which promote isolation and which may precipitate loneliness. It was therefore necessary to consider unequal or unjust social conditions and to encounter the emotional field that developed within them rather than seeing loneliness simply as a characteristic of individuals. There are instead lonely times, lonely places, lonely

circumstances. One aspect of social conditions that required exploration is 'anomie': the sense of deep disconnection from others that arises from social isolation and an actual lack of daily contact with other people. There are people who can go days without speaking to anyone, often as a consequence of poverty. A second was the emotional impact of poverty. Over and over again we encountered a sense of shame associated with poverty. We argue here, following Imogen Tyler's work (Tyler 2013), that the dynamics of this emotional field are shaped by a practice and process of social abjection and by responses to it: the process in which populations are rendered disposable and seen as rubbish, and their responses to such rubbishing, which include both internalisation and resistance. These dynamics are discussed both in Chapter Four on Loneliness and Poverty and Chapter Five on Being an Outsider. This chapter also puts into question the issue of 'community' and the negative aspects of 'community' for those who are positioned as outsiders and explores spatial aspects of loneliness. The emotional dynamics discussed in Chapter Five, those associated with the education system, are different – more concerned with individualism and competition – but are all pervasive as the education system affects all young people.

<1> Chapter 4: Loneliness and poverty

In one form or another, a discussion of the impact of poverty on young people's lives emerged in every setting the research team engaged in.

In recent years the proportion of children living in poverty has been rising. These rises have been documented in great detail by the UK government-funded Economic and Social Research Council's Poverty and Social Exclusion team (Dorling 2018), as well as by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Peter Townsend, the sociologist who did so much to advance our understanding of poverty and its relationship to wider society, was also one of the founders of the Child Poverty Action Group. In 1979 Townsend defined poverty as follows, highlighting that poverty is about a lack of resource. This resource is certainly financial, but it also includes a lack of access to good education and healthcare and to positive and trustful communities:

> Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong. (Townsend, 1979)

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is a highly respected think tank that presents evidence about poverty in the UK to policy makers. Their definition of poverty is (JRF 2016), 'when a person's resources are well below their minimum needs, including the need to take part in society.' In 2008, the JRF published the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) – the

benchmark of minimum needs based on what goods and services members of the public think are required for an adequate standard of living. This includes food, clothes and shelter; it also includes what we need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society. According to the JRF, today in England there are 4.1 million children classified as poor (JRF 2018). This means that they are unable to take part in the norms of society, their parents or guardians are unable to purchase items which the majority of the population consider to be necessities. Very often, for example, children are unable to take part in relatively cheap school trips or have a birthday party because of the lack of money in their lives. A lack of adequate financial resources is the decisive characteristic of poverty. Many studies and activist campaigns record the struggles involved in living in poverty: the constant decisions about what to do without, the choice between necessities, such as heating or food, the inability to provide clothing or shoes that last for children who are growing all the time.

However, it is hard for those who experience these difficulties to identify themselves as poor, especially in relation to the experience of poverty on a global scale. The Beveridge Report (1942), the foundation document of the Welfare State, described the five Evils - to be countered through the state provision of welfare services – as Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. It is Want that is our focus here: a lack of ability to provide. In 1945, there was a clear link between Want and Idleness (lack of work) and one of the key economic drivers in the postwar period was the commitment to full employment. Now, of the 13 million at the bottom of the UK's income distribution, more than half are in work. According to Danny Dorling (2018), what this means is that the tax and benefits system, which props up the incomes of the relatively poor, is also propping up the incomes of the

shareholders in the companies that pay too little. In-work poverty is as significant as poverty among those living on benefits.

According to the Child Poverty Action Group (2019), on the basis of research conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research in March 2019, the annual poverty statistics for the UK found:

- "The number of poor children in working families is up from 67% to **70%.**
- **53%** of poor children are aged under 5 (up from 51%) - that's more than 2 million children.
- **200,000** more children live in absolute poverty after housing costs (shortened to 'AHC' hereafter).
- The number of children in poverty is 4.1 million (AHC). That's 30% of UK children below the poverty line.
- The risk of poverty for children in families with 3 or more children is up from 32% in 2012 to 43%."

This change and worsening of poverty in the UK, and its presence in the lives of those in paid work, does not need to be attributed to the malaise of neoliberalism. It is a direct result of deliberate policies: the four year freeze on children's benefits alone (child benefit and child elements in tax credits and universal credit) will lead to average loses of £240 per year for families with children and will result in 100,000 more children in poverty by 2023-24. Over the decade from 2010 to 2020, child benefit – a vital lifeline for families struggling to make ends meet – will have lost almost a quarter of its value simply because it has not been updated as prices have risen.

For many, the losses will be much greater because of the freeze in help with housing costs and other benefits, and the impact of the benefit cap and two-child limit for those claiming support. These controls on the poorest sections of the population are also profoundly stigmatising and contribute strongly to a culture in which poor people are held responsible for their own poverty. Whereas in earlier periods such social conditions were viewed as a social issue in need of social redress (which might take a variety of forms), the most powerful framings are now of responsibilisation and abjection, in which those who experience poverty are seen as the source of their own misery. While the experience of social abjection has been discussed in relation to shame, it has less often been noticed that this is accompanied by loneliness. This is the focus of the findings we present in this chapter.

In a study undertaken for the Office of National Statistics (ONS 2018), it was reported that children who receive free school meals report experiencing loneliness more often:

> Children who received free school meals were more likely to report feeling lonely. Of those children receiving free school meals, 27.5% reported that they were often lonely, while 5.5% of children who did not receive free school meals reported the same.
>
> There was also a noticeable difference in whether children received free school meals and reporting low levels of loneliness. Just over one-third of children who received free school meals reported that they were “hardly ever or never” lonely, compared with nearly two-thirds of children who did not receive free school meals (ONS 2018)

One sociologist who has foregrounded the emotional impact of poverty is Tracy Shildrick, who analyses the juggling acts for families on the 'low pay, no pay' cycle. These juggling acts themselves required strict routines described in detail by those Shildrick interviewed:

> I walk to my eldest daughter's house and I'll ask her to give me a meal. I go to Sainsbury's about 9 o'clock and look for all the reduced items. Buy a loaf of bread and it'll last you for four days. Reduced eggs, they'll last you a week ... I'll have vegetables with rice, bread and egg. (Amanda, 48) (Shildrick et al, 2010)

Shildrick writes of the way debt impacts on household living standards because of the failures of the benefit system or during low-paid, insecure employment. Strategies like those described by Amanda were carried out and experienced over the long-term and across periods in and out of work. Their impact was sustained over long periods of time and felt by children who learned never to ask, for example, for items which schools might suggest parents bought or contributed to. Borrowing from family and friends was a regular and necessary experience for the majority. Yet families experiencing such stresses rejected the term 'poverty' because of the shame associated with it (Shildrick 2018).

In every context in which the researchers engaged, the impact of poverty was highlighted by young people and youth workers. It was discussed in terms of a sheer lack of financial resources, and the inability to make ends meet, but also in terms of physical isolation, drug abuse, isolated and uncared for towns and a common experience of poor mental health. In what follows we highlight how all these experiences together can be considered as constructing the framework for the experience of loneliness among many young people.

<2> Poverty: no money

> 'It's terrible if you see that everyone's having a party online and you can't afford to go because you can't even afford to buy sausage rolls. You have to go to the food bank but you aren't going to go to the foodbank because it's so undignified. We've seen that a lot.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

The inability to make ends meet has become highly visible as a result of the growth of foodbanks across the UK, especially since 2014, with the trends set to continue as child poverty grows. It has been less widely noted that not all areas have had the resources to organise foodbanks, nor that during school holidays many food banks run out of supplies. Nor is the fact often discussed that the shame associated with needing to use a foodbank is so strong that many people simply refuse to do so. The emotional cost of finding reasons not to attend, for example, a small party organised by friends, or a family gathering where everyone brings along something to eat, when even something as basic as a small packet of sausage rolls is beyond your means, is many layered. It includes both the pain of being unable to afford even the cheapest brand, and the impact of the felt need to disguise the reality. These are the layers of feeling in which loneliness is built. These are also the conditions in which young people move out of connection. When young people or their families are unable to take part in everyday life and the small celebrations and get-togethers that others take for granted this leads to shaming and isolation and loneliness.

Pilots of changes to the welfare system were taking place during the period of this research:

> 'This area was a test area for Universal Credit. They feel like the guinea pigs of the system. I think they thought, if we can make it work round here, [then] we can make it work anywhere. People have been going six weeks without any money and all

you've got round here is your family, and if you haven't got your family or they've split up or something, you've got nothing.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

Universal Credit has now been widely shown to have had extremely damaging consequences. It is a UK system that has been introduced with the stated aim of simplifying working age benefits and incentivising paid work. It reduces six previous benefits to one, and the payment of rent is included in this same payment. It has been estimated that 3.2 million families have lost £48 a week (the total monthly payment for a couple is currently just less than £500). It is paid in arrears, leaving many people facing debt from the beginning of the scheme. For those struggling with poverty of this kind, the sense of being 'guinea pigs of the system' is acute and expresses clearly the sense of powerlessness and frustration that is endemic in many of the poorest neighbourhoods in the UK.

The idea of the 'guinea pig' stands for a non-human creature used to test the efficiency of a new drug or process. Universal Credit is a new process that is designed to cure an alleged problem: that of an overspend of public money on Social Security payments. The new system is designed to incentivise work, but those in work are often in poverty too and subject to the random allocation of work opportunities, either by chance or through 'zero hours' contracts:

'With seasonal work, you can get work, but they get all the staff for the holiday camps for example at the same time, and if you miss those three days, because you are ill or something, you can't get the work and you are on your own all summer. Doing nothing. Just staying in all the time. Watching telly. Then in winter Great Yarmouth is like a ghost town with no work at all.' (Pete, aged 18)

For this young man, a decision to seek work for the summer season had been interrupted by a bout of chronic illness, which he had suffered from throughout school. This led to boredom and to isolation, and a failure to re-establish a social network, which left him vulnerable to loneliness that became depression. For another young man, his access to employment mitigated his isolation slightly but not his poverty or his sense of exploitation:

> I joined the Union this week. My nan is really proud of me. We were on Zero Hours and no contracts, no money except when they wanted you to work twelve hour shifts and we were being kept off the car park area at Tesco's by the security guards when we weren't working. (John, aged 18)

Wanted for their casual labour, treated as 'disposable populations' to be moved on, it is remarkable that a response of solidarity, passed on from an earlier generation, was still available to John in the form of joining the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). It is clearly the case that a basic lack of resources, especially money, makes it hard for young people to keep connection with others at an important time in their lives. Furthermore, the sense that their presence is not wanted accompanies this. As we discuss in detail in Chapter 5, most people growing up in the UK receive a strong message that this is the time 'to learn to stand on your own two feet', so the shame of being unable to provide for themselves is strong.

People living in rural areas said that just getting to places to meet and socialise was a challenge. The contrast in rural areas between those who have their own transport and those who do not fuels much loneliness and a sense of missing out on what others take for granted. In discussions of rural poverty, the issue of transport is often highlighted, and when the experience of young people is brought into the frame, there emerge complex issues

concerning dependence, independence and inter-generational equity as well as cost. Dependent on car-driving family members for lifts, and resentful of the free travel afforded to senior citizens in contrast with the lack of concessions for the young, the ability to establish an independent social life is severely compromised by transport issues for many rural young people. This is even more the case where young people and their families are experiencing poverty.

> 'There's just one long road in and one long road out of here. If you don't have a car you've had it, basically. There's no trains and no buses. McDonald's is the popular place to hang about, but they're fed up because they are getting moved on from there now.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

> 'People start to drive young here. One young man, who lives out on a farm, said to me one day, "Isn't it funny…I live on the Lone Road and I am really lonely." [So] He's living on his own out on that farm and there are no neighbours anywhere. To have friends you have to come into town.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

The practical limitations on the possibilities for contact are exacerbating the limitation on opportunities for new friendship which life in rural towns entails. Poverty is accompanied by a difficulty in travelling and sharing experiences with others or meeting new people and enjoying new experiences. This can also be true in urban areas when young people do not have access, in the same way as elders do, to cheap or reduced public transport systems, and with chronic isolation can come a loss of confidence in accessing travel when it does become possible. Thus, the tendency of the poorest neighbourhoods to become locked into the narrowest experiences is created and reinforced.

<2> Poverty: 'Uncared-for' towns; 'This is the worst place for…'

People who work in youth projects can have a deep knowledge about the neighbourhood in which they work, and can powerfully communicate the important facts about the neighbourhood that contribute to understanding the young people's lives. During this research, we were often told that the project we were visiting was in the second or third most deprived ward in a Borough or District or City, or even sometimes in the country. We were invited to consider that this was the worst place we would have been, and that the types of drugs consumed and crimes committed here were particularly problematic.

Sometimes that can sound a little like the rhetoric that comes with the job. There have been a number of studies of community-based youth work that have questioned the investment which practitioners can be drawn to make in these representations of the neighbourhoods in which they work. The more severe the difficulties faced in a neighbourhood, the greater can be deemed their heroism in working there. The value of Imogen Tyler's (2013) conceptualisation of social abjection is that it shows the class dynamic at work, which converts systemic injuries into personal shaming. This shaming also occurs at the level of the neighbourhood and can be reproduced in bids for resources, in ways that mean these damaging classifications are present in the work of projects which are overtly committed to empowerment. Nevertheless, during this research, youth work staff were very keen to make clear the reality of what these indices of multiple deprivation mean to their work and for their engagement with young people.

> 'It's a really transient population here. 50% of the people who live here don't come from here: they're Scousers, from Manchester, from Oldham. There was a murder here recently and some boys who used to come here got put away even though they

didn't do it (the story is connected to a drugs trade story - JB) … A lot of people move in and out of the area. It can be tense.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

Being transient can have many meanings but it suggests an instability of connection to a particular place and also a sense of belonging elsewhere, which may lead to particular groups being seen as untrustworthy, suspect or worse. Murder, though still an exceptional and rare crime, in this account, is seen as arising from the life of a particular criminal community linked to a neighbouring urban area. The people from the city region are then treated as suspect and they must be kept at a distance. Keeping one another, and perhaps many others, at a distance whilst living in close proximity creates tension. Knowing who to trust and who not to trust is complicated and dangerous work. Perhaps in such contexts, 'keeping yourself to yourself' seems the safest option and this too is a condition of loneliness.

The challenge for youth workers is to face the realities and still to support young people without adding to the stigmatisation of neighbourhoods. The impact of social shame was present in all the places we visited that have experienced poverty and neglect for many years. The contrast between the small towns and the urban areas, where often a sense of proud belonging can mitigate the effects of poverty, was sharp. The sense that a particular town has a bad reputation, and that people who live there are looked down on and mocked is not an individual pathology but a reality of a social system that mobilises stigma in the service of growing inequality. Internalised or projected outwards as aggression, it can lead to a powerful social isolation:

'Someone I met at university took three years to tell me he came from Great Yarmouth. I come from Norwich and we had both gone away to university but

he couldn't say he came from Great Yarmouth because he was expecting to be judged. So he could only make friends by pretending and had not been able to share a really important part of who he was. That makes you lonely.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

Linked to the process whereby populations and particular towns experience social abjection is the process of being deemed 'less worthy' and 'not entitled' to many forms of social support that bring with them a sense of being worthy of care and entitled to exist and thrive in the world. Sometimes these lacks of entitlement are so taken for granted that they only come into awareness when people see and experience conditions elsewhere:

'We went on a visit to Cambridge recently with the project and I've never been there. It was lovely. Really clean and looked after and the people there seemed really looked after. People don't feel looked after in Yarmouth.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion).

The researchers visited places and communities across the UK that are struggling under years of disinvestment, poverty and austerity policies. Loneliness is a sense of distance from how we would like our social or emotional lives to be. Yet, there are many ways in which people are distanced and feel disconnected from a life with economic security, with dignity and hope in a better future. Research details the ways in which particular groups and places are rendered abject, labelled, and blamed and shamed for being different or outside of society (Tyler 2013). We found that these feelings of distance and shame were not dissimilar to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Yet, as visitors to these communities, we were impressed both by the strength of the people and the beauty of the places.

<2> Poverty: Poor mental health and drug use/abuse

It is in the context of such 'shaming' that the experience of poverty can come to be linked to drug use/abuse and poor mental health. This is sometimes described as a process of self-medicating but it can also be seen as a way in which communities and neighbourhoods are controlled, both through addictions and through the criminal gangs that support the addiction, as well as through the legal chemical controls used to alleviate the symptoms of mental illness, especially ADHD, anxiety and depression. This was discussed by youth workers and young people both in terms of its long history as well as a response to current conditions. The impact of heroin in post-industrial areas as it developed from the 1980s is not limited to the 'Trainspotting' generation in Lothian, but exists in many neighbourhoods that experienced the mass unemployment of the time. Heroin use itself is not a sociable practice. There has been little culture and no supportive scene around heroin. Relationships within a heroin using community are often mutually exploitative and built for a common purpose of getting the heroin that is needed. Nevertheless, heroin is a drug that takes away pain and numbs everything, while putting your life on hold.

> 'This town is characterised by a problem of 'hidden harm'. Heroin came here early and there are young people all over the town living in families where they come second to the drug use. The biggest barrier to overcoming loneliness is acknowledging that you need help and support. There isn't one person that comes through that door that doesn't need help and support.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

The other key addiction that was discussed was alcohol addiction. This is a socially acceptable addiction and sometimes being drunk is seen as a requirement of being sociable and able to be friendly and connected.

> 'I'm out on my birthday. I'm drinking this bottle of Patron. Technically I'm destroying my body through alcohol and all that shit but if I post it [online] what does it mean to other people? It's like the likes. I'm addicted to likes. You get that quick little buzz then you question it. Question the way I behaved. Question posting it. Like I was saying, I was destroying my body… [but] we live in a society that idolizes celebs and all they do is post pictures of them doing drugs and drink and all that.' (Mark, aged 25, Manchester)

> 'People say 'no pressure,' but when they say that they mean there is pressure. And with social media, people don't post bad things, only good. You're just being faced all the time with things you can't have.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

The level of pressure which young people experience from a variety of directions can lead to loneliness and to socialising in destructive and self-destructive ways, seen as preferable to suffering the shame of being alone and to getting a diagnosis of mental illness of some kind.

In a recent paper for the 'Pathologies of Solitude' project, David Vincent reiterates many of the perceptions of the young people we encountered:

> Recent United Nations data suggests that fourteen million people, over a fifth of the population, are in poverty and one and a half million are destitute. Deprivation has impacted directly on solitude with regard to inadequate housing, insufficient surplus cash to spend on personal pastimes, and exclusion from physical and virtual mobility.

> The poor are also less likely to have access to the social and medical services which can relieve the experience or threat of loneliness.
>
> The post-1998 austerity programme challenges any attempt to develop a government strategy in this field. But with the state unable to spend significant sums on welfare and continuing disinvestment in critical facilities such as public libraries and adult social services, the prospect of an effective, integrated attack on even the more acute forms of loneliness seems remote.
>
> Loneliness has become a proxy not so much for the contradictions in the social relations of our times, as for the intensifying crisis in the distribution of wealth and the management of public services. (Vincent 2019)

This was strongly reinforced by Philip Alston, the UN Rapporteur, whose analysis of poverty in the UK was greeted with scepticism by the Conservative Government:

> Austerity policies have deliberately gutted local authorities and thereby effectively eliminated many social services, reduced policing services to skeletal proportions, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres, and sold off public spaces and buildings including parks and recreation centres. It is hardly surprising that civil society has reported unheard-of levels of loneliness and isolation, prompting the Government to appoint a Minister for Suicide Prevention. (Alston 2018)

We have discussed the questions of this 'take-up' of the loneliness agenda in an earlier chapter and the issue of its connection with suicidality is considered later. However, the way in which conditions of poverty exacerbate loneliness for young people could not have

been more clearly stated in the research we undertook. The social conditions of poverty exacerbate not only shame but also loneliness.

<1> Chapter 5: Being an Outsider

'Community' is often used as a warmly persuasive word to add a positive glow to a policy or seen in a nostalgic lens as having been the prevailing characteristic of working class life and being among the primary working class values. In the process of this research, some assumptions about 'community' were strongly challenged. This chapter focuses on the ways that 'outsider' positions are constructed and contribute to the social conditions of loneliness. It does this by examining stories we heard that were presented by those who told them as aspects of small town or small place experiences. We recognise that these experiences can be mirrored in the more liberal cultures of many cities where young people growing up in socially or religiously conservative families find themselves positioned as 'outsiders', especially in relation to liberal sexual cultures. In our analysis, we have connected this with themes of social segregation.

Large urban centres are often seen as 'the lonely city'. Smaller places are often characterised, both positively and negatively, as having a strong sense of community and belonging, but young people growing up in such places explored how these too can be lonely. It was the experience of being 'different' from the norms of that particular place and subject to the formal and informal policing of those norms which threatened to leave young people with the feeling of being 'outsiders', not belonging and experiencing loneliness in consequence. The research team found that a sense of being an insider or an outsider, of belonging or not belonging, may be strong in places which pride themselves on their sense of community. In a city, where there are multiple possibilities of connection and disconnection, everyone is an outsider to someone, and so potentially also an insider and belonging to someone too. In smaller settlements such as villages and towns, there are

different conditions of connection, as most people can be expected to know one another, to attend the same schools and to shop in the same shops. Experiences of loneliness are therefore intricately entangled with our relationships with ourselves, with people we know or are near to, and with the spaces which bring us together or keep us apart.

<2> Disability and segregation

One young person, Alan, spoke at length with researchers about his experience of schooling. This was a young man who had been through primary school with a constant struggle to engage with the work but who nevertheless enjoyed school, despite being teased, called names and generally bullied because teachers often singled him out as behind the rest of the class. His complex needs and disability meant that he was often not able to attend school as he had to attend medical appointments, and he told us that at the end of primary school it was assumed that he would no longer be able to attend a mainstream school as a result of his 'special needs'. All the children in that area who were classified as learning disabled were expected to attend a special school and not to be able to manage alongside others.

> 'My mum helped me. We were being told (because I had learning disabilities), "you can't go to that school; you can't have this and you can't have that". But my mum fought for me not to have to go to a special school. You get really isolated from all the other kids if you live in a small place and you go to a special school.' (Alan, aged 17)

The term 'special' has become a loaded and much hated term among activists in the Disabled People's Rights movement. It is for good reason that, in that movement, such

schools are usually referred to as ‘segregated schools’ (Greenstein 2015). The impact of austerity measures is felt disproportionately by disabled young people and those classified with special educational needs. Since 2014, the numbers of young people who have not been allocated places in schools has risen dramatically and most are expected to be home schooled (Allfie 2019). Alan’s sense of how his needs were responded to was channelled through an immense respect for the way his mum had fought for him, which he communicated strongly. His mum was a powerful ally and friend and he explained his feeling that it was friendship and not becoming isolated that mattered, and that going to a special school was a clear route, in his village, to becoming a definite outsider, cut off from the other families in the village. Making sure he was not cut off from a friendship and support network had been his mother’s priority. In addition to this, there was a sense of his mother resisting, on his behalf, the discrimination which attending a special school entailed, in terms of the reduction of expectation in educational opportunities and the possibilities of exam success. It was only, almost as an afterthought, that Alan explained that although he was now fighting, once again, for access to a college: he had in fact achieved pass grades in five GCSEs. He was also a confident member of a county-wide youth project, often representing them at key events.

<2> Sexuality and isolation

In one Northern Irish town, the youth project had been set up initially to support young people experiencing multiple ‘hidden harms’ within their families, harms which are often hidden from the young person themselves and may not be known to their schools or other adults. Whilst retaining its function as a hub for those young people, it was also developing practice rooted in the traditions of youth work in Northern Ireland where creativity and

nurture flourish. The town has long been divided between the majority Unionist community, which is highly Conservative, and the minority Republican community. Union flags were flying on lampposts on the streets when we arrived in the town. The hub of the project is in a shop on a street corner in the town centre, deliberately chosen to be in a neutral area. These potentially conflicting senses of community and loyalty still persist, long after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, even if they are no longer the only or the chief focus of youth work. In a lively discussion among youth workers, one mentions that, 'the bravest thing anyone ever does here is to come in at the door.' Every young person has to move out of their own territory to come to the project; it can often take a year between someone first hearing of the project and actually arriving there.

At the start of the session, the Manchester team and the Northern Irish youth workers met and began to talk about loneliness. A member of the research team mentioned the sign on the window celebrating Equal Love, with a rainbow clearly visible:

> 'We really needed to start up LGBT services as there weren't any here and we were meeting young people who were thinking of taking their own lives. That poster in the window is the only one supporting equal same sex marriage on display in the town. We haven't had a brick through the window yet though.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

This is a socially, religiously and politically conservative town, and so anyone questioning their heterosexuality here will to this day expect rejection and loneliness as a taken for granted starting point. In putting up that poster and indeed in starting an LGBT group, the youth workers were indicating their sense of the loneliness and isolation a young person might face and their determination to open up a different path. Indeed, the 'out' youth

workers in the area tended to be based in the nearest city. This situation was not completely different from the position in many other small towns across the UK. Still, the appearance of the poster in the window combined with the fact that the window had not yet been broken was seen as a mark of progress by another Northern Irish youth worker we spoke with:

'If we had put that poster up twenty years ago, or even one that mentioned contraception, there would have been a phone call telling us to take it down the next day. Maybe the days of 'whatever you say, say nothing' are beginning to come to an end' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion).

Since this research was undertaken, the situation has changed dramatically in Northern Ireland following the murder of Lyra McKee, a journalist killed during rioting in Derry in 2019, and same sex marriage is poised to become legal at the time of writing.

There is a sense in which the process of growing up and becoming an adult who embraces the possibility of romantic and sexual relationships, and thereby of leaving the childhood home, is always a potentially lonely process, whatever the sexual desires and orientations that are being explored. But in small communities where personal desires are the subject of political control, and where what is acceptable is very closely regulated, 'coming out' as lesbian, gay, trans*, or any other kind of queer non-normative human is almost certain to be a lonely process. Indeed any kind of breaking away from established norms, even for those experimenting with heterosexual relationships, is likely to be isolating. Ironically, this is something which conservative religious communities, which may be hostile to one another in many ways, can be expected to agree on. The controls that are exercised on sexuality in conservative religious culture may also become politicised in a very public way at times, with active political campaigning against sex and relationships education for example, or

against abortion. Such campaigns further intensify the fear and loneliness of young people as they begin the exploration of their adult sexuality, and of the possibilities and responsibilities which accompany it.

<2> Racism, segregation and isolation

A further example of being lonely as a result of being positioned as an outsider concerns the impact of segregated employment practices. Some districts in the town house employ foreign workers only: 'There's a chicken factory there and the only people who work there are foreign workers and the majority of people here don't like foreigners.' Although this participant in the research was referring to a particular chicken factory in a particular town, there are many such chicken factories on the edge of small towns, and segregated places of employment throughout towns and cities, that employ and exploit foreign workers. Children and young people from the families of these workers, growing up as foreigners, may well never become insiders in this town, and so rely on befriending one another, connecting with families 'back home' and perhaps with fellow foreigners in larger cities. They survive in this way but remain outside the intricate networks of the locals, and hence much more vulnerable to both attack and exploitation. When young people seek to question community expectations or norms in such situations, where their only chance of avoiding xenophobic hostility is by sticking with their community, the experience of loneliness is all the more intense.

The racism experienced by people of colour in places where they is a very small Black presence was also articulated in the course of the research. One young man, a very talented footballer, was supported by a coach who nevertheless used racist banter as a motivator. The young man's ability to respond to this banter was limited. In this small town, he had

strong roots and good family support from his white family, but his 'difference', as a mixed race young man (as he termed himself), was continuously marked through such banter. It was only by moving to the city and making contact with other Black communities that he began to feel a real acceptance of his Black identity. In so doing, he was able to acknowledge the impact of the racist banter. Previously, in order to sustain connection and friendship, he had been required to go along with it. Racist banter in schools and the failure to address this was a theme chosen for enquiry by the British Youth Parliament's Youth Select Committee in 2016, a fact that indicates that the experience that we heard recounted during the project was far from unique.

<2> Isolation and keeping out of trouble

Finally in this context the challenge posed for young people trying to avoid getting involved in low-level crime in an area where this is the norm was mentioned as a source of pressure and loneliness. This is particularly hard in communities where crime offers a real opportunity to make much needed money. It was providing support to such young people that motivated one of the youth workers in the study to set up a club at a different time of day for a small group of young people who were consciously avoiding and hiding from other club users. They felt frightened of other young people who had come to dominate the youth provision in the town and who were regarded as dangerous:

'There's a group of young people who I've started a new club for. They come in just after school. They don't like coming when the other kids come, cos they are really quiet, really shy. There's just a few of them, but they're getting a chance now.' (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

In summary, young people were reporting experiencing loneliness as a result of the slow pace of change in their home towns and villages or in their neighbourhoods. This then is self-reinforcing as people who feel they do not generally fit in, would rather leave and find connection and a sense of belonging elsewhere. In terms of sexuality, this was discussed everywhere as an issue for everyone who was identifying as not straight, as anything other than heterosexual. It was also the case for heterosexual young people whose behaviour was judged negatively. This could be because they were seen as too sexually active, or, in a reversal of the same theme, as not sufficiently interested in sex. However, needing to stick to your own community (even when you felt isolated within it) was at the same time a rational response to sectarianism and racism, thus limiting the social networks that young people could draw on. In a similar way, traditional and narrow attitudes to disability created loneliness and segregation.

<2> Youth loneliness and place

The places we live matter, and they offer young people a range of specific possibilities for connection. Lack of access to transport on equal terms with senior citizens is a very common issue raised by young people living in both urban and rural areas. During the period of this study, young people in Greater Manchester led a successful campaign through the Greater Manchester Combined Youth Authority for a travel pass that would also extend access to leisure, sports and cultural opportunities. From September 2019, young people have been able to apply for a pass which will give free bus travel to 16-18 year olds as well as access to cultural and sport events from Greater Manchester-supported groups. But this kind of access, which has been successfully campaigned for in a major urban area, may be less forthcoming in rural areas and may mean less when most bus routes have either closed or

are limited in their hours and destinations. Similarly, most rural areas do not offer equivalent sport, leisure and cultural opportunities to those available in urban areas.

At the same time, the attachments to place and the access to the natural world commonly available to people living in small towns and in rural areas can be seen as a resource to counter loneliness. It is harder to sustain and to recreate such attachments in a move to a complex urban area, and this may underlie the loneliness of some students on their move to university, who miss not only people but the specific place and environment that they have left. Whilst the examples in this chapter suggest that small places are successful at creating outsiders, this can also be a condition of urban life, which can be seen as nothing other than the creation of a plurality of possibilities for outsider status. What matters is that we are attentive to how the kind of place, and both the social and the geographical networks and natural resources of a particular locale, have an impact and form part of the social conditions of loneliness for young people.

<2> Youth loneliness: segregation, stigma and racism

The story of the boy whose mother fought for him not to have to attend a special school can be seen as a fight against the impact of segregation. Young people whose parents work in the chicken factory that only employs foreigners are also experiencing a form of social segregation. In the case of the boy with learning disabilities, his mother was fighting for his friendship networks that she sensed would be severed in the small place where they lived if he was sent to a different school from all the other children. When possible friendship networks are limited to those who share the same conditions of discrimination, the same limitations on their opportunities and the same restricted conditions of life, strong bonds are formed within a community, and strong norms also. Young people who are seeking to

test the limits of these norms and forge a different path for themselves are likely to be lonely on two counts. They will be lonely within their own community, even whilst it may be holding tightly on to them. They will be lonely through a lack of ability to experiment with the possibility to live life differently as this involves facing the anticipated possibility of an elsewhere. And they will in all likelihood be lonely when they have gone away from the community they are leaving.

The operation of stigma and shame is, as was discussed in the previous chapter in relation to poverty, a powerful control on young people. Loneliness itself can be stigmatised and this is then often caught up with other aspects of the stigma machine (Tyler 2020). The example of the decision of the youth hub in Northern Ireland to challenge homophobia by publicly displaying a poster supporting equal marriage is an example of an action taken to counter stigma and the loneliness associated with it.

The stigma attached to growing up gay (to use one shorthand for LGBTQI*) remains systemic. While it does not appear straightforwardly as segregation in the labour market (as for the workers in the chicken factory) or in the school system (as for the boy with learning disabilities), it is routinely presented as prohibited in many religious cultures, alongside but markedly worse than other sexual offences, and potentially punished more severely. This includes, internationally, the existence of regimes that retain cruel punishments such as stoning and other forms of the death penalty. The fact that these punishments exist globally can be mobilised as a source of fear and threat even within societies with more liberal legal systems. It also remains the case at the time of writing that there are very strict restrictions on abortion in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom and same sex marriage remains illegal there. The common use of the word ‘gay’ as a generic insult among

young people in schools is a daily mark of these systemic conditions and cannot be well challenged by invitations to more respectful speech alone.

These structuring conditions support patterns of social relations which are then experienced personally. Growing up with a fear of being marked by stigma is silencing and prevents authentic reaching out for connection. The stigma machine creates one of the social conditions of loneliness.

Given that the Black body has carried projections of violence which have then supported the fantasy of the need for forcible control since the era of slavery, it is inescapably the case that systemic racism has a powerful impact on both girls and boys as they are growing up. The fact that in some aspects this may be connected with loneliness is less evident but was made clear to us in the account of the experience with the football coach. Racialised banter as a form of humour might necessarily be disavowed as racism, in a situation in which there was little Black presence. Young people claiming their identifications with Blackness often do so in a context of significant isolation, in an education system which largely renders their experience invisible and a policing system which continues to assume that they are considerably more likely to be involved with crime and violence than their white counterparts. Young people in this situation are isolated, unable to share their experiences with their peers and forced to put up with low-level harassment disguised as humour with good spirits.

One of the most significant shifts in academic youth studies has been in the recognition of difference as the very basis of experience rather than as 'deviance'. Nevertheless, hegemonic systems, particularly in education, continue to normalise and to work through binary constructions of 'them' and 'us', different and normal. It therefore remains the case

that loneliness can be a consequence of not participating in hegemonic constructions of 'them' and 'us' . In consequence it is also the case that in the words of one of the participants, though loneliness is real, it may, in the process of moving towards a sense of authenticity and creativity in living, not always be worst thing.

In this chapter we have suggested that a claim to a strong sense of community should not be taken at face value. Studdert and Walkerdine (2016) suggest that 'community' should be seen as a verb and not a noun: community and connecting are actions caught in and creating the forms of micro-sociality that we have discussed in this chapter. These forms of micro-sociality include, all or any interaction between people, something as small as smiling at people you recognize from frequent sightings but do not know, to groups working for common goals like a community centre, to the various behaviours of the state through formal and informal interaction.

In the examples we have considered in this chapter, all these levels of micro-sociality are present: from the nourishing and sustaining of an inclusive community based youth hub to the racially inflected comments that may or may not be jokes of a football coach and in the state-led directives concerning 'special educational needs.' These can all be seen as contributing to 'community' as a verb, with all its dynamic force and its existence as a vector of power with the ability to include and exclude, and thus also to be a social condition of loneliness.

<1> Chapter 6: The education system, aspiration and loneliness

In August every year in England and Wales, the announcement of exam results is a moment of mental health crisis for young people. The normalised pressures which the current education system places on young people throughout their schooling and into their twenties and beyond is the third focus for our discussion of the social conditions of youth loneliness. We are considering the education system as a social condition, as it is the chief institutional framework that shapes the experience of all children and young people. The regular summer coincidence of the reporting of exam results followed by reports of increasing incidence of mental health problems among young people is not actually a coincidence at all, in the sense of a random happening. It is built into the system. This chapter explores a systemic emotional dynamic which is deepening the chances of loneliness among young people and which is re-inforced by the belief that 'success is individual'. A banner in the street displaying this very message and created by fashion students of Manchester Metropolitan University was prominent in the city centre throughout the period of this research.

Discussions in the core research team led us to focus particularly on the impact of aspirational cultures. The theme of aspiration has been widely discussed in educational research and the political rhetoric surrounding the alleged lack of aspiration in pupils of lower socio-economic status has been subject to scrutiny (Siraj Blatchford 2009; Holloway, Brown & Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Allen 2016). In our study, the ways in which aspiration creates loneliness and isolation came to the fore.

An important recurring finding was that loneliness accompanies both the fear of and the experience of disappointment: of disappointing both oneself and those who have invested

their hopes in you, if and when the path of education or career 'success' is not sustained. There is extensive research that demonstrates the various ways in which young people are told that they must be resilient, hardworking and competitive, and that they must aspire to career and material success. These aspirations impose particular pressures on young people, creating idealized career trajectories that are difficult to live up to. The inevitable disappointment is intrinsic to the hopes of betterment.

At the same time, the success imagined and worked for in these aspiration narratives tends to lead young people away from their families and support systems. This is especially true for young people who are the first in their families to stay on in the education system and attend university. The emotional as well as the financial costliness of such transitions is too little acknowledged still. They involve shifts in identity and the development of new forms of hybrid identities emerging through difficult emotional dynamics in the families who are to be left behind but who have nevertheless helped sustain their children's success: difficult dynamics of children 'never asking for anything'; of parents as burdened; of envy, love and pride. Moving into the intellectual domain is a massive shift for working-class young people who do well at school, requiring an internal and external transformation. The complexities of the losses as well as the gains involved in educational success and upward mobility for working-class young people need to be much better understood.

Recent and older writing on this theme has highlighted the ways in which those from working class families navigating the education system are accompanied by loneliness as a result of the experience of dislocation and care-less-ness (Rogers 2016). The sense of lack of entitlement is powerful and connects to an outsider status in the world of academic

achievement, an achievement which had never been anticipated or understood in the lifeworlds in which they have grown up.

In the context of schools, whilst the terrors of performativity - for both teachers and pupils – have been well and widely documented, there has been less discussion of the complex systemic emotional consequences of these data driven cultures of performativity. It is as if the connection must be erased between the exam results announcements immediately followed by discussions of deteriorating young people's mental health. It might have been expected that a finding of our research would be that school exclusion creates loneliness. Clearly it can and does, however, the loneliness associated with those who aspire high and are conformist to the messages of the school system was an unanticipated finding and one which we focus on here. We see this as an aspect of the social conditions of loneliness, as the pressures to succeed within the school system are almost universally experienced, even though negotiated by young people in very different ways.

Anyone, even people who are apparently doing really well, can experience loneliness, and the negativity and isolation embodied in loneliness makes it hard to share. Loneliness is stigmatised, and so loneliness is lonely and silenced. The desire for success is at least a double bind: hard when achieved (social distance and physical distance can accompany success) and hard when there is failure.

> 'There can be so much disappointment and loneliness because we are encouraged to aspire and have ambitions and then what happens when we fail? Maybe exam results aren't good enough. The ideal you've been built up for – like being a footballer, being a doctor – doesn't happen. So who are you now? Who do you connect with? Old connections are broken. Who do you turn to? Not your family

because you don't want to add to their sense of disappointment… Online, happiness is compulsory. Looking happy online with a drink in your hand. You can't say: this is really hard and I'm missing you…. And sometimes, even when I've now done everything I was meant to do, and I've succeeded in school and pleased my family and gone to uni, and I still feel very unhappy and lonely… what now?' (Patience, aged 20, Manchester)

In this case, a sense that disappointment and loneliness might be circulating in a family or support network is made explicit. What a support network might look like in a world in which all are expected to 'stand on their own two feet' deserves further consideration. If seeking support and help is stigmatised as failure rather than celebrated as success, this means, in a culture which values individual success above everything, that even the most well designed interventions will founder.

<2> Individualism

The celebration of individual achievement is a basic aspect of contemporary life. The ability to celebrate and mark one's own achievements is in itself necessary both for further achievement and for achievements to be recognized. The 'selfie' must be posted along with the news of results. Anita Biressi has studied the use of the selfie in work cultures and media cultures that create a set of messages about the manufacture of a successful self (Biressi 2017). The production of the selfie is a personal project, especially in relation to the worlds of paid work, careers, and economic security that is now deployed across the social spectrum. Both working-class and middle-class subjects are invited to present their best selves via selfie culture. These are used to demonstrate their 'passion' for work. According to Biressi, selfies bind together personal biographies and social media profiles in the pursuit

of advancement and financial security. Workers are figured as the heroes of their own lives and self-portraiture is one important component of this self-fashioning. Biressi calls this an 'idol' of self-production.

The idea of the 'idol' is important in pointing to the forms of hero worship that flow through individualist society, in which we are invited to see ourselves an appropriate object of adoration even as we are also invited to idolise remote and glamorous others such as celebrities, pop stars, and footballers. A narcissistic spirit of worship informs self-production and selfie production, and seems at times to chime with an apparently democratic promise of meritocracy. But it also addresses (in a commodified form) desires for authentic self-expression. The power of the selfie is an index of the anxieties produced by the individualisation of work in a precarious economy. These anxieties serve to mask an experience of loneliness. And a definition of adulthood is 'learning to stand on your own two feet'.

One young person talked movingly about the loneliness he had experienced when he left home to go to university.

> 'I come from a single parent family and I'm very close to my mum. I did well at college and I got a place at Uni in London. But I had to come home. I was so lonely. I was doing well on the course, very well. But I had no friends and I didn't have enough money. London is so expensive. But you can't keep running to mummy and daddy.' (Matt, Norwich)

A number of reports, including studies undertaken by the UK Higher Education Statistical Association (HESA) have recently highlighted the loneliness faced by a significant minority of

students at universities, and the serious increase in mental health problems that may also accompany it. Many of the anxieties that develop during schooling are now intensified in the extended period of transition that university represents, and anxiety about the debt incurred through studying becomes an additional pressure. Powerful messages that attendance at university represents 'success' and 'the time of your life' inevitably produce disappointment and make loneliness all the harder to bear. The culture of individualism in both education and employment offers few strategies for coping with such disappointment and loneliness. While a climate of magical voluntarism – the myth that we can overcome difficulties through our own efforts – prevails (Fisher 2014), the disappointment and depression consequent to our inability to change things individually is both commonly experienced and intensely privatized.

<2> Instrumentality, work and achievement

> 'I'd like to organise an event where every time a teacher spoke to a student, the students would just reply with their exam number and their predicted grades.' (Silvia, Manchester)

The issue that young people are known only by their scores, their exam number and their predicted grades, or only by their position on an assessment scale in relation to mental health issues, is being increasingly discussed. This kind of relationship between young people and the institutions that support them fuels loneliness, partly by building in the expectation that the education system has no interest in the value of young people's lives beyond their academic achievements and other key indicators by which schools are judged. Young people's attendance and success at school is required to fulfil the school's insatiable appetite for improving metrics. It's the scores on the doors that count. Additionally, young

people are not expected to enter a relational space, but one in which competition for positional goods and status is the norm.

> 'I used to think that when I'm 30 I'll have the Mondeo, the house and all that stuff. But… I'm getting older and I still don't know if I'll get that. I don't know what I'm doing yet. I don't have a career. I'm trying to find my path… I get anxiety about not spending my time wisely, not getting ahead. Why am I not building, being productive? Why I'm not getting on? … But what if you're productive and get a job but don't like it? I'm from a family that counts every penny and I might be able to change that.' (Gil, aged 23, Manchester)

This young person feels pressure to use his time productively, expressing an instrumental approach to time, where succeeding for himself and his family ought to take priority over taking time to connect with other people for pleasure and social relationships. Then there are fears of failure and isolation. Not wanting to worry or fail your family seemed to be a pressure that kept some young people from being open and honest with their family, isolating them from potential sources of support and care. An education system that seems to make the promise 'work hard and you can have anything you want', does not and cannot deliver on that promise, especially not in terms of cash and especially for those who come from 'families that count every penny' (Mendick et al. 2015).

Achievement and aspiration often involve a loss of support structures and this loss does not only apply to those in the allegedly 'non-aspiring' traditional, post-industrial communities. Aspiration and achievement can also come at a cost of the loss of new forms of support that have emerged in urban centres such as Manchester for people with non-normative sexualities. This, for example, is a vignette developed in a group of LGBTIQA* young people:

> ‘I just started my first job and moved from the big city to a small town. Up till now life revolved around making music but in this job it’s hard to fit in. I just don’t fit in. I just don’t get the work environment. In the office there’s just one type of group who are all getting married and having children I’m away from the people I like and get on with. It’s a small town. There isn’t loads to do and there aren’t many people to find who are like me. But I’m doing the job because it pays well and my family are very proud of me.’ (Sally, aged 23, Manchester)

The family’s strong recognition and pride in their daughter’s achievements is coming at some cost of loneliness for their daughter. The norms of a working environment that revolves around hetero-normative family life are isolating and provide no sense of possibility for a young woman who identifies as gay. The imperative to earn well however is the strongest driver, even though the emotional costs are significant.

In contrast, others become isolated because they have no access to a workplace or a peer group. We spoke to a girl whose parents had conservative views and who was not allowed to go out to work, unable to make the first steps to financial independence:

> ‘My father didn’t want us girls to go out and get work. But my sister went and got a job working on a Burger Bar at Old Trafford [Cricket Ground] so she did that for a bit and I was envious that she had her own money and I wanted to do it too. But my family thought it wasn’t suitable for girls to go out to work; to be out alone like that. I can go college though.’ (Miriam, aged 19, Manchester)

The use of the phrase: ‘to be alone like that’ is telling. It tells of a family’s sense that a girl without the protection of a man, whether it be her father, brother, cousin or husband,

would be ‘alone’ and therefore vulnerable. In a sense, the young gay woman in the office just described might be said to be ‘alone’ in this way, as she no longer has the protection of a music scene she loves or a sense of a gay-accepting community around her. At the same time, the young woman who, unlike her older sister, does not defy her family’s expectations is lonely. Their protection is creating a restriction for her, which attending college may mitigate and may even change. However, attending college will not any longer give her access to the all-important independent financial resource. In other powerful narratives of success, access to financial independence is so important that it must be achieved even when loneliness and separation from support networks is one of the costs.

Isolation and loneliness can then occur both in trying to live our society’s dream of aspiration, individual achievement and success, and in being prevented from doing so.

<2> ‘You can’t keep running to mummy and daddy’

Sometimes schools’ formal systems are so distrusted that friendship involves navigating what seem to be offers of support and turn out to be dangerous in the name of what seem more real possibilities of support:

> ‘My school has a support hub where pupils can go if they are feeling lonely. But you can’t go there. It’s the last place you can go. No one would use that hub if they were lonely.’ (Faith, aged 16, Manchester)

In the conversations that happened about loneliness, the idea that young people yearn for or aspire to an impossible future was never far away. This is combined with the idea that success in adult life involves ‘manning up’ (for people of all genders), managing life on your own and not running to mummy and daddy. As such, it should surprise no-one that

loneliness is a feature of many young people's lives and is likely to remain so as long as schooling and education is focussed as it is currently.

This is also the chief reason that attempts to 'fix' loneliness as it develops into isolation may require radical strategies rather than simple interventions. In any case, one of the ways that loneliness can become a fruitful ground for change is by allowing and acknowledging its existence and supporting the capacity to be alone in one's company as a place from which to find deeper forms of connection.

The imperative to be happy is certainly strengthened in social media practices (not discussed here) which were highlighted in our study. In families where a high premium was placed on the need for children to succeed in school, there was a particular issue associated with pride. The phrase, 'my family/parents are very proud of me' recurred in these contexts and the sense of letting parents down and disappointing them by acknowledging unhappiness was in itself a powerful source of pain. For some participants in the research, these parental projections were strengthened by the practice in schools of allocating 'expected results' from a very young age, such that a failure to achieve predicted top grades can be experienced as devastating failure, even when the grades are still in the highest categories. The issue of how to enable a sense of pride in oneself is made extremely complex in such a school/family dynamic. Thus even for children for whom 'the bank of mum and dad' exists and who can and do keep 'running to mummy and daddy', there is a loss of status and potential infantilisation and isolation involved.

In turn, this can become an issue during working life with a recognition that the family's investments in their childrens' success has to be protected, even at the cost of telling the truth about what is really happening in the workplace. This is a time when many graduates

are not employed at 'graduate level', and many who are either self-employed or employed at graduate level are not able to find more than very casual and precarious employment and cannot secure a place in the world of property-owners. In this context, protecting a proud family against the truth of disappointment must be a widespread feature of youth loneliness. In terms of how schools might respond, there is clearly a need for a more honest account of the relationship between educational and employment outcomes. The examples of pride in collective endeavours, such as joining a trade union or acting as an advocate for young people in relation to mental health, point to another way in which the pressures implicit in the 'pride/disappointment' dynamic might be re-channelled.

Like pride, aspiration (as an individual) must be intrinsically linked to hope and therefore to disappointment and shame. It is clearly possible that a desire to please one's parents may also be part of a wider set of possibilities for the future, and of alternative and what some would term utopian imaginations. This connects with the issue of the temporalities of youth loneliness. Given the transit status of 'youth' and the way it can intersect with other provisional and transitory positions, we need to enquire more into the ways in which way adults (especially perhaps teachers, parents and youth workers) invest hope in young people as signs of the possibility of a better future. This appears to contrast with the way young people themselves seem to practice hope, which is in an altogether more pragmatic and here and now kind of way. The methods that young people have developed of giving and receiving help reveal this. There is also an increasing recognition that adult autonomy is not necessarily to be accepted as a goal of development. Rather the capacity to give and receive help throughout life may begin to be seen as a definer of acceptable human relationships. It is interesting how often this is the case with non-normative communities.

Young people's exposure in schools to messages of empowerment, hard work, aspiration and resilience (Ringrose 2007), and the need to stand on their own two feet and look to themselves alone, needs questioning. We have seen how these individualist practices of aspiration, success and disappointment are accompanied by potential loneliness as an ever present companion for young people caught up in these institutionalised dynamics. Throughout this period of research, the circulation of powerful media discourses that frame success and failure in achieving ones aspirations of wealth and happiness in terms of individual efforts rather than more complex classed and gendered explanations (Mendick Allen & Harvey 2015) has been clear.

<1> Section 2: The experience of loneliness

In March 2019, research conducted by YouGov for The Prince's Trust (2019) showed how unhappiness among young people had been increasing. In response to the statement, 'Life is really worth living', the percentage of the poll who disagreed had doubled from 9 per cent to 18 per cent. 1 in 5 young people are said to experience loneliness. 4 in 20 may not. It is not always clear which statistic is thought to be more serious. Loneliness as a pathology of solitude may, with good support and a caring community, turn out to be transient. An inability to experience loneliness and perhaps therefore an inability to recognise and empathise with this experience in others may be an equally serious and under recognised pathology.

In the chapters that follow, we discuss what we learned during our study about young people's experience of loneliness. Beginning from what has been termed the 'normative loneliness' associated with transitions we present more fully some of the experiences of pain, grief and loss which seem accompany loneliness, as well as some of the experiences of being singled out as not normal, as 'different.' In doing so, we draw extensively on thinking from a diverse range of feminist and queer thinkers. We draw on Judith Butler's discussion of the practices which produce norms, and their disruption. It is the case that the repeated rehearsal and citation of ideas of 'normative transition' itself reproduces an exclusionary norm which in turn intensifies loneliness. In responding to such exclusionary norms, much can be learned from the 'trans*' community and from the youth work developed there. Since the possibility of experiencing loneliness must be faced as an aspect of all transitions, the active work of creating community arises in response to such loneliness. A recognition

of the exclusionary power of normativity paradoxically opens up a set of new spaces and practices for a new sense of community to come into being, founded in difference.

Also important in this section of the book are the discussion of shame and stigma and again we are indebted to Imogen Tyler's work here and that of other feminist scholars. The understanding of affect and in particular its classed nature was developed initially by a number of feminist writers, especially Beverley Skeggs who mobilised the work of Bourdieu to deepen the understanding of the power of class-ification and the classed nature of practices of distinction and privilege. In Skeggs' thinking, institutions and privileges produce quite real affects and effects, durably inscribed in beliefs. Skeggs captured the complexity of how emotion works in sustaining habits and practices. Shame as an emotion conjures an impending future in the body as if it has already happened. A person feeling shame feels 'I'm dead. I'm done for.' This sense of frozenness, deadness or stuckness can also be associated with the shame of victimisation. Following this line of thinking/feeling, the impact of shame is a kind of re-traumatising: it renders us fearful of experiencing again the violation of a boundary. We become fearful that in being shamed a further boundary violation will occur and that there will be a re-enactment of the original violence. We therefore hide in shame. And so the paradox, that shaming and shame, with its accompanying loneliness, is a profoundly social event and happening which constructs a social isolation (Skeggs & Loveday 2012).

Audre Lorde's work and its development in bodies of 'queer theory' provides the framing for the chapter on 'Being left out' and offers a powerful strategy of response to such framing which needs to be worked with actively. Lorde's essays were inspirational bodies of writing for the women's movement of the early 1980's and are being re-engaged with now. Her

affirmation of the ontological grounds of difference and its existence as a source of creativity provides the basis for an understanding of the cruelty that is inflicted when distortions of difference which exclude and oppress become powerful. The energy of her writing shows the ways in which the apparently frozen and solid states associated with shame are unsettled in joyful movements which affirm the lives of those otherwise seen as weird outsiders. Such joyfulness may be connected to the sources of joyful extension of capacities discussed in relation to the philosopher Spinoza in the final chapter in this section which considers the experience of online connection.

<1> Chapter 7: Transitions

<2> Youth loneliness and transition

'My sister's about to start at secondary school. I hope she makes some friends.' (Manchester researcher)

'You can't keep running to mummy and daddy' (Young person, Norwich).

Changing schools, passing and failing exams, going to college, starting work, moving out from a childhood home, breaking up with a first girlfriend or boyfriend; all of these are considered by sociologists and social psychologists as routine moments in the lives of young people. They are considered to be moments of 'normative loneliness.' Times when, it might be said, loneliness is only to be expected. They are moments sometimes marked by rituals and rites of passage, which in themselves may be occasions of acute loneliness: a results day; a school prom; 'the keys to the door'; stag and hen parties. In this chapter, we explore these everyday moments of potential loneliness in the lives of young people.

Moments of transition throughout the life course have clearly been recognised by social psychologists as moments of potential loneliness, and in other studies times such as retirement, children leaving home, leaving work for a period of maternity leave, as well as bereavement and becoming a widow or widower have been given as examples of such transitions (Perlman & Pelau 1982; Qualter et al. 2013). The time of transition is a time of change, when some aspects of experience can be let go of and responses to experience can be reconfigured.

'Youth' as a life stage has been routinely analysed by sociologists as the period of transition between childhood and adulthood. In contemporary neo-liberal conditions, this transition is

recognised as an extended period, often continuing well into the twenties. This is also discussed in terms such as 'broken' or 'complex' transitions, which refer to young people's difficulties in movement into adult roles and to this happening at a comparatively young age. Independence of income, housing, and the formation of adult relationships, including the raising of a family, are the key markers of adult status. In conditions of austerity in the UK, it is very evident that achieving adult status is harder and harder for young people. In the UK currently, a million more 21-30 year olds live at home with their parents than did a decade ago (Mohdin 2019). Rents are so high that this prevents many from saving towards a deposit on a house, and half of this age group do not own their own home. The abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance in 2010, which encouraged young people to stay in education post 16, and the introduction of student loans that pay fees but provide little towards the cost of living has deepened continuing financial dependence on 'the bank of mum and dad' for some, and on debt for many more others. This has a further impact on the possibility of starting a family and on the conditions under which this happens. As a result, this period of change, always a demanding one, is now extremely elongated and complex for many. The normative loneliness associated with these change processes is in a sense expected, and also expected to be transient. However, the experience of loneliness over what is now often a long period can more easily become chronic and hard to shift. And given that 'youth' itself has been defined as neither one thing (childhood) nor the other (adulthood) but as transition, it may come to be seen as nothing but change and paradigmatically more lonely than the more settled states on either side of it. This identification of 'youth' with the movement and sometimes turbulence of change could also underline the tendency to associate a more intense kind of access to existential loneliness with this period of our lives.

Both the conceptualisation of normative transitions and critiques of this approach have a long history in youth studies. The idea of a transition is increasingly open to question as the markers of social transition – finding steady employment, living independently, starting a family – can be argued to have all but lost their normative force amidst the fluid social relations of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). Some analysts now focus on 'pathways' and 'choice biographies' – a conceptualisation which emphasises young people's agency but is no less normative (Ball, Macrae & Maguire 2013). Such terms suggest that a generational shift and change which occurs in social relations is less coherent than it was previously thought to be; individual differences are more strongly experienced than class solidarities in the processes involved in that generational shift. These are the forms taken by 'transitions' in liquid modernity.

In education research, transition is also discussed in a more specific way, to refer to the move between schools at age 12. Since our research was undertaken, this has been highlighted as a moment when reported loneliness among young people spikes, as it also does between the ages 18 and 21 (ONS 2018). The move between school and sixth form, and between sixth form and college/university were also significant in our study.

The discussion of the normative and of consequent social abjection by feminist philosophers has played a significant role in the background thinking for this study. It is important both to recognise that the repeated citation of particular practices is what forms a normative practice, and that these citations can be subverted, as experience that cannot be suppressed and which exists below the level of articulacy emerges to form the grounds for change. In what follows, as the normative moments of transition are explored, it is

important to consider both the everyday ways in which norms concerning transitions are practiced and the ways in which the subversion and unsettling of them begins.

Finally, we need to draw attention to the temporality of transitions: the way transitions exist in time as momentary and extended experiences. The research team noticed that transitions can be big or small, and the experience of loneliness can be fleeting but intense in small 'in between' moments and places. The time between the end of school and the night; the beginning and end of the weekend; Christmas and New Year; holidays; Valentine's Day; the more major and hegemonic timings of school transitions and school/ college/ university/ work transitions; moving city; ending a relationship with foster carers; ending a romantic relationship: each of these is a very specific and often only a passing moment, though these moments vary in lengths. Recognising these temporalities reveals a sense of moments of loneliness emerging in gaps in the flow of the social and sometimes opening up into a more enduring sense of sadness or isolation.

In later chapters of this book, we explore how practices of friendship and association emerge in response to the loneliness associated with difference and with youth transitions.

In what follows, we consider in turn particular aspects of youth as transition and the loneliness accompanying it that emerged in our study.

<2> Starting secondary school

On one occasion (due to a misunderstanding!), the research team met with a group of children who were in the last year of primary school. It was striking how easy it was for them to talk about loneliness compared to the teenagers we met with. It seemed likely that the moment of starting secondary school, which is also a time of change, of leaving

childhood behind, accompanied by bodily changes and changed expectations of how young people cope with life's challenges, can potentially be a lonely time.

The stories we heard about loneliness at this point of transition to secondary school were often about finding a peer group:

> 'He started smoking with a group just to fit in as he doesn't fit in anywhere else. He's frightened of being alone and it causes really bad anxiety so smoking lets him be part of something. Maybe he won't be the one person who stands out, who always has his headphones on. So he hangs around with the group smoking, but he still feels alone.' (Melanie about her brother, Manchester)

> 'In her first year at secondary school she finds it difficult to make friends. In the school summer holidays, hoping to make friends, she goes with some other girls drinking on the streets, gets very drunk and is picked up by the police. She tries to get away from this group but is bullied by them. After this she becomes very frightened and isolated and depressed and moves to a different school.' (Sumaiya, aged 23, Manchester)

For each of these young people at the start of adolescence, the anxiety associated with being alone led them to connections which deepened their difficulties: one starts smoking, the other starts drinking on the streets, and these strategies only make matters worse, or at minimum do not help. At this stage, they had few other resources or strategies with which to respond. However, the sources of this anxiety may lie in the question of what it means to conform to a set of normative practices and the potential impossibility of doing so. There are many connections between 'being an outsider' and the experience of anxiety and of loneliness.

Anxiety has been described as a feeling of dread, a feeling of being 'on-edge', and it has numerous physical accompaniments. These feelings can have a strong impact, including a response of social withdrawal, avoiding or losing contact with friends and family, and even avoiding the places that are associated with anxiety. At one extreme, this can be the basis of a refusal to go to school. Paradoxically, it can be argued that the stigmatising of the state of 'aloneness' makes loneliness all the more likely. The societal failure to nurture the capacity to be alone makes the state of loneliness still more painful.

One young woman (aged about 15) spoke about the isolation that she had expressed in the first two years of secondary school in the following way, as recorded in research fieldnotes:

> She explained that in her early teens she was very unhappy and lonely but had no way of expressing this. She would create chaos in the classroom and on the corridors, and had made public displays attempting to hurt herself, threatening to jump out of windows or throw herself downstairs. C. said she now recognises that she was extremely naughty and badly behaved to draw attention to herself; but that this made other kids wary of her, they left her alone. Although in time and with support she was able to stop the disruptive behaviour, by now she had become very isolated. She became that lonely kid wearing headphones. Headphones on, listening to music: it seems rude at first but when you get know them you realise that it isn't. She said: 'I would rather be alone with music, it is an escape. (Research fieldnotes based on Carol's story, Manchester)

C's distressed and distressing behaviour, creating chaos and publicly hurting herself, was accompanied by loneliness, and further intensified her loneliness, even when it stopped being externalised and became introjected. Her moment of calming down – or, more likely,

of internalising her distress – probably allowed her to stay in mainstream school and avoid the experience of joining a Pupil Referral Unit. It did not make her less isolated, but it possibly did remove one further contributing factor to loneliness among young people: the experience of being classified as 'NEET'.

'NEET' is one of the most powerful policy classifications to have entered the professional jargon of welfare and education professionals: Not in Employment, Education or Training. The experience of being removed from or falling out of the education system, as would no doubt have happened for this young woman had her disruptive behaviour in the school continued, is also potentially a condition of loneliness. Once out of the system for a period of years, it becomes very difficult to reconnect. It is not only already existing distress that can cause young people to become difficult for the system to hold. Random events and accidents of life that lead to time off school can also contribute. A significant reason that young people lose contact with friends and peer groups is through long term and chronic illness. Not everyone who has this experience falls out of the system, but there can still be costs in terms of social isolation. And just as transition between primary and secondary school is a moment of change, so are the moments between secondary school and college, between college and university, and, eventually, for most people, the moment when the education system is left behind and the world of earning a living (or not) shapes experience.

> 'I had significant periods in hospital during secondary school. I became obsessed with studying and not getting behind with my work. I did very well in exams eventually but I found it hard to make friends; I didn't fit in and I was always putting my foot in it. People didn't like me hanging around with them and told me to get lost.' (John, Manchester)

In this context, it may be that identities of 'outsider' or various 'geek' identities become better fits for an individual who is making sense of their isolation.

Leaving behind the pressures of secondary school, establishing a personal sense of self, making new friends and affirming emergent adult identities are important markers of transition which can very easily be both supported and interrupted by life events. Disappointment can accompany exam results, early relationships often break up, relatives and friends may have negative reactions to 'coming out'. This experience is explored further, in subsequent chapters but here it is sufficient to note how strongly the narrative of adventure and positive opportunities at the threshold of adult life can mask difficulties and distress.

> 'I stayed on in the sixth form into the third year when all my friends had left school and gone on to do a gap year or gone to university. I knew I would be leaving soon and so I didn't bother making new friends. I missed the old friends.' (Maya, aged 19, Manchester)

The institution of the gap year is promoted in terms of individual development and advancement, backpacking travel and enlightenment, benefitting both the self and impoverished communities around the world. This is how it is discussed on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service website in 2019:

> The gap year offers you the opportunity to gain skills and experiences, while giving you time to reflect and focus on what you want to do next.

> A productive gap year can be valuable on your CV – many employers value the experiences students have gained if they've actively managed their time, set themselves goals, and stretched themselves.
>
> A gap year can also enhance your higher education studies – if you decide to apply for uni, you could tailor your gap year to relate it to the subject area you plan to study.
>
> Admissions tutors know that some students may take a little time to adjust to studying again, but many former gap year students are generally more focused and responsible. (UCAS 2019)

Whilst the powerful message about a gap year is that it is a time for exciting adventures, it can be a very lonely time:

> I'm starting to feel very lonely on my gap year. Though my gap year was unplanned (missed my firm, clearing was a nightmare), I'm starting to regret not choosing to go to university. My tactic was to take a year out, re-sit some modules, get into a better university, travel and do some things I'm passionate about. With the lack of friends I have around me at this particular moment in time (most are at university), I feel very lonely and it's quite depressing. All I ever seem to do is jam on the net and watch TV. (Ann, posted on internet site, 2017)

> 'My daughter would have been much better going straight to university. She got A stars and is going to a top university next September. She really fancied travelling, but she didn't want to go on her own. She's been working in a café earning money, but none of her friends have any money so she's ended up not going, being stuck at

home on her own, nothing much to do, getting bored and a bit lonely.' (Youth Worker, Manchester)

<2> Moving

The experience of being new and being an outsider that occurs with the transition to High School, also occurs when a family moves through migration, or for work. It can also come about when a young person leaves the family they grew up in, for example by moving into care or moving to establish their own home, perhaps by going to college or university. Not everyone who has arrived new in a place has experienced trauma, but the experience of isolation can make a person hyper-sensitive to hostility from others over time.

'No-one else from my family has ever been to University and no-one else lives over here. I didn't know any-one and I knew I had to do something to get out of my room so I eventually joined a football team.' (Danny, aged 23, Manchester)

The psychosocial costs of being the first in a family to go to university and the losses as well as the gains that this involves have been too little recognised. The possibility of accessing a continuing form of care and support becomes put into question for many young people, especially amongst those who are breaking from family tradition. The potential loneliness of student years does not however only apply to those who are first generation university students:

'If you asked me what represents my feeling of loneliness most, it's when I've been in all weekend on my own and there's left over pizza in the fridge at the end of the weekend, because I've ordered a pizza but I can't eat it all. I came here to go to university, but it didn't work out. I've left home and don't want to go back to the

country town I come from, but I'm new here. Anyway I've lost contact with my school friends. At my loneliest, I didn't go out. I just stayed in and watched TV. Mostly I'm flicking channels, doing video games, doing online stuff, looking for something I'm interested in. I don't have a steady job. I get bits and pieces as a freelancer. But at the moment I'm working at a call centre, where I have to put up with a lot of rudeness. I don't like the people I work with so I don't know them and I don't want to know them. It's all turned out so much harder than I expected and I'm not making much money. I feel a failure at times and I don't want my parents to know.' (Clayton, aged 21, Manchester)

<2> Starting work

Many young people enter the labour market by working part-time or undertaking voluntary work or unpaid internships. Even when they are well qualified, they almost certainly lack experience, and unspoken expectations about team work and communication skills can lead them to become very uncertain and potentially isolated in the workplace. Contemporary employment patterns are in any case isolating as well as often exploitative of the young. For example the minimum wage remains set at lower levels for those under 25 than for others. There are many aspects of working life that are unfamiliar to a young person just starting work, from the surroundings of a workplace to practical matters such as working time, breaks, pay and tax, working conditions, dress codes, and health and safety in the workplace. In addition, matters such as manager's expectations around performance, including probation and processes for feedback and appraisal and lines of authority at work are experienced for the first time. It is very important that young workers know where they can go for help when difficulties arise, that they know their trade union rights and that they

are supported in getting to know and integrate with older colleagues. Being called 'an apprentice' can be a source of anxiety and insecurity. One young person from Unionlearn's Voice of the Apprentice network articulated the need for support very clearly:

'I want a supervisor who's around to support me. When you're on rotation, trying different bits of the business, it can be really helpful to keep the same manager so you've always got a base to come back to for advice you trust' (apprentice from unionlearn's 'voice of the apprentice' network).

In conditions of precarious employment on zero hours contracts, many young people lack such support during their transition into the work place. Even for graduates working in the new digital industries or creating their own start-ups, the conditions of work can be very isolating and support networks may remain persistently virtual in comparison to the close presence of others in the networks of childhood.

<2> Independent living

Some members of the core research team had moved to the city to find work, whilst others had returned home after university. Some had dropped out of university. Almost half of the population still do not continue into higher education and for them, the need to establish independent living arrangements is not supported by a transition to university. In the UK this transition to independent living arrangements happens all the more rapidly– at age 16-18 - for young people who have been raised in the care system.

One young person spoke of the loneliness of remaining in the city and not returning home after university:

> 'After uni, six months ago, I decided not to go back to the place in the East Midlands where I come from and to get my own flat. So I had moved out of student

accommodation and into a place of my own – a really cool place in the Northern Quarter – but I didn't know anyone and I felt really on my own. I do know lots of people here: I work and I have friends from Uni but it's not like being back at home where I was born and where my family are and where I know everyone. Everyone says this is a friendly city, but I don't think so' (Pete, Manchester)

The fact that many young adults are forced through financial necessity to move back home is also however a cause of loneliness that leads to them feeling cut off from their peers. One young woman whose sister had moved back home after being at university because she was unable to find work and could not afford to pay rent, talked about feeling lonely in this way:

'I feel worried because my sister who went to Uni ahead of me has gone back to our parents' house now and she is really unhappy about that: she says she has changed but they can't help it, they still treat her as a kid now she's gone back, and also she can't have friends round, and any way she has no money to go out with… I wonder if it's worth it, after all.' (Cathy, Manchester)

<2> Romantic relationships

Moving into a romantic relationship and then marriage or a committed relationship and cohabitation is seen as a significant mark of adulthood. For young people who remain single longer than their peer group, issues of emotional loneliness emerge as important. Dave in Manchester said:

"I really really wanted to have a girlfriend. That was more important than who she was. Perhaps its not surprising we broke up. But I'm really lonely now. Maybe I will just get a dog".

Even when it is recognised that it is possible to experience loneliness within a relationship and to have a sense of connection and support whilst living alone, remaining single for a long period can be accompanied by a loss of other friendship support as peers orientate to the nuclear family.

Even though the 'milestones' of transition are more various now and the time for forming relationships is extended, the pain associated with potentially failing to meet the milestones is often both strong and isolating. As will be discussed in a later chapter, while romantic breakups in teenage years are often dismissed and the pain involved minimised, they can lead to a long term chronic loneliness: 'I thought I'd have a home of my own by now, and a wife and a car and it isn't happening…I'm so frightened of being on my own for the rest of my life.' (Pete, Manchester, 28)

<2> The play 'Missing' and the character Jessica

The Loneliness Project research team's method of developing witness accounts, through the creation of scenarios and characters by individuals and small groups, culminated in the production of an immersive theatre performance, 'Missing'. One significant feature of 'Missing', salient for this chapter, is the process through which the main character was created. In the middle stage of the research, scenarios of loneliness that had been shared in other groups of young people were shared in the core research team. This led to further reflection and further story telling. In this process, a good deal of written material was generated and it is this which is drawn on throughout the current book.

Jana Wendler and Trish Coleman were the Creators of 'Missing'. Jana had joined the research team from the early stages, in particular to introduce a playful 'walking' methodology. Both Jana and Trish engaged further in the process mid-way through the year

in which the research took place and supported and further developed the process of story telling and elaboration of the research methods. In doing this, they were drawing on methods that have roots in applied theatre on the one hand, and feminist inspired 'memory work' on the other.

In applied theatre, the practice of story boarding is common, as a means of enabling both identification and dis-identification with a story that participants wish to share. In 'memory work', the process of dis-identification, generalisation and abstraction is supported by a move from first person to third person accounts. Firstly, material that had been generated earlier on in the project was chosen and reworked in the third person. It was then shared again in a workshop with the research team, and stories were reflected on and retold, and other stories were generated.

As a result of this process, a decision was taken (by Trish and Jana) to create an immersive theatre performance which would stimulate further engagement on the tour. This was based on the character of Jessica. Jessica is a girl of 17 who is doing well at school: her predicted grades are good, and she is hoping to go to university. She has a job in a café, a secure family life and a group of friends. There seems to be little wrong with her life. But she goes 'missing', and the stage is set in an incident room of the police station, in which teams of young people become the investigators, looking for the clues as to what has led to her disappearance and where she might be. The choice to focus the story on an ordinary girl who is going through many quite mundane but very common and recognisable transitions was made deliberately in response to the persistence of the 'transitions' theme.

Moments of transition have been identified as moments of potential loneliness because they are times when established connection is interrupted and new connections have yet to

be formed. This is the case throughout life. In the period of the transition to adulthood however, when this is experienced for the first time, loneliness may be felt especially intensely.

Whilst there are now neurological accounts of the intensity of feeling in adolescence, it is possible also to recognise this intensity whilst refusing to reduce the experience of it. This experience has been recognised and expressed most by writers such as Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. Though loneliness is terrifying there is something precious about it. As Sula says in Toni Morrison's novel of that name, 'My lonely is mine. Nobody can take it from me.' However ordinary these normative transitions maybe, the loneliness and pain associated with them can be acute and deserves attention, especially as it may become the start of a more enduring and chronic loneliness.

<1> Chapter 8: Loss, Grief and Loneliness

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‘My dog died and I felt very very lonely.’ (Guy, aged 11, Stoke)

‘At my grandad’s funeral I felt very very lonely.’ (Pete, aged 12, Stoke)

The children in the youth group we met in Stoke were younger than any of the other groups we met and, in contrast to all the other groups we engaged with, found it easy to acknowledge times when they felt lonely. The difficulty in acknowledging vulnerability in adolescence and young adulthood when young people are supposed to be learning to ‘stand on their own two feet’ is an important theme of this study. The youngest people we met during the course of the research seemed to be the ones who found it easiest to speak about loneliness, and they immediately connected this experience with bereavement. In this chapter, we move to look in depth at some of the most extreme and difficult experiences associated with loneliness.

Loss and its accompanying loneliness has often been associated with the bereavements of later life, but loss, bereavement and grief are also strongly present in early experiences of loneliness. This may be a result of experiencing the death of someone loved, but loss also occurs with the experience of parental divorce and separation, or of moving into foster care. Sometimes loneliness results from losing a feeling of safety and

good connection which happens as the result of violence. Then the stigma, shame and self-reproach associated with becoming a victim of violence is redoubled in a further stigma associated with loneliness. Drug treatments for grief are currently being piloted and it seems possible that grief, like loneliness, may become medicalised rather than being accepted as a necessary and valuable though painful element of our reaction to loss. This chapter explores the loneliness associated with loss and grief; and also the loneliness associated with shame and social isolation.

Some of these experiences of loneliness associated with loss are acute but momentary, and they show that loneliness is an unavoidable aspect of being alive and grieving the loss of some-one loved. They are not something to be ashamed of and yet loneliness itself is often a source of shame and stigma in a world that seems to require the performance of happiness and success. But when loneliness is experienced as part of multiple losses and at a time of change and transition, it can become a trigger for and/or an accompaniment to a serious and persistent life crisis.

The loneliness of approaching the reality of death for the first time, the processes of grief and the feelings associated with a break in connection with someone on whom we have depended, perhaps for our life, can be intensely felt at any age. Perhaps this is especially the case among teenagers experiencing the death of someone loved for the first time.

Grief is the expression of our sadness associated with the loss of some-one we love; the more complex the relationship we have had with that person, the more complex the grief. Well established accounts of grief draw on the model first established 50 years ago by Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1969) and speak of the processes of denial, anger,

bargaining, depression and acceptance that moving through grief involves. They do not however speak of the loneliness and potential isolation that accompanies sadness, well attested in the many variations of the harsh, popular saying: 'Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone.'

Grief is a process that may enable comfort to be sought and found. Such comfort may include an appreciation of the continuing power of the love that has been lost or the life that is ended. Of course this is unlikely to be experienced often in so simple a form. Like many of the other losses which are experienced in life and which are complex, grief following loss as a result of death also takes complex forms. The strategies and resources that are available to us and that we develop for responding to such loss for the first time provide a pattern for our responses through life; support in relation to this in adolescence will therefore be of great benefit. The wider social response to such loss shapes this context of support. The prospect of the medicalisation and pathologisation of grief and its accompanying loneliness affects the experience too.

In the rest of this chapter we will explore moments in the encounter with loss and grief that we heard about frequently which are related to violence, trauma and abuse, in both interpersonal and systemic terms. Very many of the stories of loneliness we heard involved a loss of connection, and sometimes this involved the death of some-one loved, or it involved a relationship break-up. Such moments are moments of crisis and it is at such times, among others, that thoughts of suicide can emerge as a possible resolution to a crisis.

<2> Attempted suicide

‘My friend committed suicide: they were being bullied.’ (Sade, aged 15, Salford)

Suicide – both attempted by those we spoke to, and successfully achieved by their friends, and a source of terrible loss - arose as a theme in many of the settings we were in. It appeared to be an almost natural accompaniment to the theme of loneliness, and this fact alone is a witness to the intensity of pain which loneliness can carry. Suicidality can be thought of as a sense that life is no longer worth the effort of living, and more actively as a desire that life should end. It can be understood as a desire for an ending and a break in connection, but it is by no means self-evident that it actually means a desire for death as an absolute end. It often accompanies a wish for acute and prolonged suffering to end, and a wish to remove oneself as a source of suffering for others: ‘they would/will all be better off without me.’ Prolonged loneliness is of course one such form of acute and prolonged suffering.

Bullying was often cited as a source of such suffering in the process of the research, and in one case we were told that a friend had taken their own life because of bullying. However, discussion in the psychology literature concerning bullying and suicidality shows that the links between the two are complex. Bullying alone is a not a sufficient explanation of suicidality. Those who have been bullied and then bully in their turn, however, are particularly prone to suicidality, which emerges from depression, difficult family circumstances, overwhelming life events (of which bullying may be one) and a feeling of helplessness and lack of meaning. During this study we found that attempted suicide was a particularly common experience among young people in the LGBTQI* youth work settings we worked with and we related this to their complex experiences

of homophobia and transphobia.

The theme of suicide and attempted suicide was touched on in most settings we were in. It is as if people sensed a connection between the everyday experience of loneliness and the extremes of suicidal feeling. This was not something we set out to explore but it was present as a theme throughout.

> 'When my boyfriend dumped me I wanted to kill myself. I felt so alone in the world. I was 17. I had just left my high school and I was going to start at sixth form college. I ended up taking an overdose in the summer holidays. I was OK. Everybody said it was a cry for help, but after that I carried on being very depressed and I hated college. I didn't make any friends for ages. My mum is very religious and she just couldn't relate to me at that time and I couldn't relate to her. Things are better for me now. I passed my 'A' Levels and went away to university and I have made some good friends now.' (Emily, aged 23, Manchester)

Support after a suicide attempt is often provided in youth work settings but not all suicidal young people have access to such settings. Specialist services such as Samaritans and Young Minds can give support to the supporters who undertake the being with and alongside the suicidal young person. One youth worker explained:

> 'When they are going through it, they don't need you to talk…just to listen and keep them safe. You might go with them to A and E or visit them in hospital; it's

the showing that you care and that their life is of value to you that can make all the difference.' (Youth Worker, LGBT project)

Responses to death as a result of suicide may include a sense of guilt concerning whether more could have been done to support the one who died, and hurt involving a sense of rejection and of wounding ('how could they have done this to us…'). The impossibility of finding any other release from a cycle of suffering on the part of the one who has died; the difficulty in finding words to express the response to such a death; and the shame involved in naming death as a result of suicide: all of these are elements that speak of the loneliness of which suicide seems to be an epitome. It can be understood and experienced as an absolute failure of community, connection and belonging.

The ending of a first intimate relationship can be a time of desperation and yet it is commonly discussed as trivial (puppy love; 'plenty more fish in the sea') or character building ('what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'). Because early intimate relationships are often of short duration, and because break up at this stage is a common experience endured by most people, it is all too readily assumed that the important message is to 'get over it.' Nevertheless, such early break ups are a source of intense pain, and relationship break-up is the most frequently cited cause of attempted suicide.

Depression frequently follows such a break up, especially for the person who has not instigated it, and then the loneliness that follows naturally from such a break up is intensified by the loneliness that accompanies depression. A characteristic lack of

empathy ('time you got over it'), coupled with an inability on the part of the depressed person to trust others with their experience and a tendency to push others away all intensify loneliness.

The ending of a first romantic relationship potentially echoes other losses that may have occurred throughout childhood, and it is these multiple losses which can contribute to suicidality. Parental separation and divorce is not only potentially a source of loneliness for the separating couple but also for the children. While the loneliness of adults is often discussed, the experience of children after parental divorce and separation is more often considered in terms of practical arrangements. The emotional impact of divorce and separation on children may be minimised, since it is clearly the case that witnessing abuse, neglect or even simply prolonged conflict between parents who remain married also creates loneliness for children. The loneliness in each case comes from both a physical and psychological absence of parents where presence and closeness might be expected: 'My parents split up and I never see my dad. I really miss him.' (Frankie, aged 16, Stoke)

Children brought up in care must endure the loss of their birth families and also have a very difficult transition to independence at a young age. The transition to leaving care begins at age 16, and although children who have been in care are entitled to some support until they are 25, this is minimal and many young people find themselves living independently and without any wider circle of support from the age of 16. Children who are brought up in care experience a sense of not being worthy of unconditional closeness, and this is the already shaky foundation on which the crisis of leaving care occurs: 'When I had to leave my foster family… I went off the rails. I had to get my own flat. I was on my own all the time.' (Mohammed, aged 18, Manchester)

<2> Violence, trauma and loneliness

There is considerable knowledge of the way that being a victim of bullying, abuse and violence is accompanied by shame and self-reproach, by silencing and a feeling of stigma, and by anger. There is perhaps less recognition of how this shame and self-reproach also involve loneliness.

> 'I went to an all boys school and I became a very aggressive person quite quickly in that school because it was a matter of deciding to be violent to them before they were violent to you. I was massively picked on because of my disability. They were already calling me 'crip' and telling 'crip jokes.' So I started bullying them before they started on bullying me. Didn't help though. I was still on my own.
>
> There was another boy who was really camp and he was the only one like that and massively bullied and he was beaten up. So I knew I had to protect myself and I became aggressive. All that…and the fact that my stepfather was a horrible violent man meant I eventually got excluded from school and I went to live with my nan.
>
> Now I'm like a shell. I'm like a shell. I just go through life. I'm numb 24/7. Things happen, some of it's bad, some good. I just go straight through it. I've always had that mentality, just man up and deal with it… you're on your own…It's only coming here [to 42nd Street] the last few years that I've learned to open up. I don't know what you've been through. I can't talk about other people. I've got that old school mentality of DEAL. WITH. IT.' (Mark, aged 25, Manchester)

In this account, the moves away from and towards violence are first of all depicted as moves Mark makes to protect himself from violent others. His hostility towards others is also designed to keep violent others at a distance. The change in patterns of relationship was also connected to a change in this young man's family relationships, as his relationship with his stepdad was also charged with violence: in the first place, that of his step-father towards his mother. The movement away from his mum, from his family home and its violence, was no doubt intended to offer him protection. While achieving this, it also increased his sense of isolation, and his actual isolation was then reinforced as a result of exclusion from school, due to difficult, challenging, and even bullying behaviour.

Mark's resulting self-account, "Now I'm like a shell. I'm like a shell. I just go through life. I'm numb 24/7", is an eloquent reference to the emptiness associated with trauma and also with loneliness. The sense of keeping oneself apart from others soon becomes a pattern that is hard to challenge and incorporates a hyper-vigilance which constantly anticipates attack and hostility as soon as a relationship with others is on the cards.

Another young woman gave this account of the experience of living through violence:

> 'A lot of bad things happened in my life when I was a child, when I was young. I can't sleep at night and I am always tired, so often I can't get to places at the right time. I cope by walking about on my own late at night and I go to parks on my own. I am not usually lonely when I'm on my own. I feel lonely mostly when I am with other people. I often just prefer my own company. Why do we judge people for being alone? Is it better to be without friends and safe, or with friends and vulnerable? You may get to a boundary where the loneliness is beginning to affect your health and then a persistent negative train of thought is setting in. I have used a website where I

wrote and posted my own poems as a way of looking after myself. Creativity and poetry is a way to let out feelings; you can interact with the page even when you can't interact with people.' (Sumaiya, aged 23, Manchester)

This account gives a vivid sense of what is involved in those often used phrases 'resilience' and 'coping': Sumaiya has developed a strategy of aloneness which works for her while at the same time keeping her isolated. The gravity and persistence of her experience of violence has made it difficult for her to share painful experiences with others, and so she experiences the feeling of painful separation most when she is with other people. In a life that has been marked by hostility and cruelty, it is unsurprising that her courageousness for life is at its strongest when she keeps her distance from potentially hostile others and when she is extremely cautious in her choices about where she extends her trust.

In sharing these stories, both Mark and Sumaiya have worked through the barriers created by shame; the shame of being a victim and/or perpetrator of violence and the shame associated with experiencing poor mental health. Shame and shaming is a complex practice that has been interpreted in contending accounts by radical scholars and is differentially experienced in relation to social power. For those in victimised positions, the impact of shame has been analysed as an integral part of the stigma machine at work in neoliberal societies (Tyler 2020). This stigma machine produces social abjection. Social disgust at the position and pain of powerless populations is produced continuously in discursive and material practices. People so positioned experience not only the lack of resource but also the pain of being seen as being rubbish, living in 'shit' estates and failing at every test set them in the education system. They are represented in 'poverty porn' as benefit cheats and

in policy discourse as 'troubled families', their eating patterns are seen as producing appalling uncontrolled obesity and their cultural tastes in music or media are examined for traces of their depravity. All of which is shaming, distancing and controlling in its effects (Jensen & Tyler 2015). Other writers have analysed shaming of the powerful as productive in unsettling the taken for granted perspectives of those in powerful positions. The experience of becoming ashamed from a position of power as against 'feeling guilty' is a mechanism through which a yearning for justice may be found. This has particularly been discussed in relation to racism, when 'white guilt' is analysed as shoring up the racism it is associated with, as it immobilises and prevents change, whereas shame is seen as an impetus arising in and unsettling powerful positions in order to mobilise and make changes (Sivanandan 1990). Whether shame is mobilised in the form of control in the stigma machine or as an energy for change and social justice, in each case 'shame' is recognised as a profoundly social emotion, the quality of which is felt in the body in the form of establishing or unsettling a social boundary and a physical silence (Probyn 2004).

Everyday emotional experiences are privatised and personalised, yet shame as an emotion pushes at the limits of this privatisation as it extends across networks and social groups: the contagiousness of collective affects exposes the breaches in the borders between self and other and means that others who are shamed as I am can be recognised even before a word is spoken. When the affects of shame are linked to victimisation and the enforcement of social hierarchy (as discussed by Jensen and Tyler), so that the border between self and others differently positioned in the hierarchy is not breached but rather enforced in symbolic violence, the shame experienced by the victim is a mark of that violence. This shame is embodied and found in bodily stances that are mutually recognised before their sharedness is expressed.

Furthermore, shaming makes public an experience or wound or aspect of the body (typically blood) which by definition should remain inside and private, and this helps engage with the issue of why becoming a victim is viscerally experienced as shameful. Many gestures of covering over and self-protection and hiding are associated with shame. These gestures may be related to the fear of repeated attack or abuse since those in a position of vulnerability are by definition easier to attack again. Thus, a silence about experience of violation may be a protective factor. Other aspects of the 'field' come into play if abuse is seen as deserved by the one who suffers it. And, in situations in which abuse is a repetition of a prior traumatic and abusive situation in which we have been made to feel ashamed of ourselves, shaming can be mobilised further as a form of punishment.

However, the experience of abjection and symbolic violence contains within it the possibility of a revolt. The separation that has been made can be unsettled, as can the 'othering' and rendering infrahuman that has occurred. When the experience of shame as a victim ceases to be privatised and can be recognised with others who suffer similarly, then shame can be recognised as a collectivising force. There are moments when those who are routinely shamed can refuse to be shamed any longer and turn the shame on those who shame them.

<2> The loneliness of exile

Finally in this chapter we will consider an account by a young refugee who joined the research project for a few weeks. It has been said that refugees present the fullest example of the human capacity to survive despite the greatest of losses and assaults on human dignity. Asylum seekers have potentially lost everything – family and friends, social networks, home and material belongings, language communities, position, recognition and status and a view of the future as potentially consistent with the past. This dislocation is loss

upon loss and to a significant extent is unthinkable, but it can be thought of in part at least in terms of a bereavement.

> ‘I arrived in Manchester when I was 14 from Afghanistan. This was the first place I came to in the UK. At first I was happy with lots of new friends in a new country. I played football in the park with my friends. Then, after a couple of years with my foster family, when I was aged 16, the PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) kicked in. I started behaving strangely and badly and couldn’t trust any-one. I had to leave my foster family and I live alone. I can’t watch television. I’m frightened of seeing violent scenes. My mind goes blank a lot and I can’t concentrate. I feel nothing. Because of this I dropped out of college and the motor vehicle course I was doing. I couldn’t cope with studying because I can’t concentrate. I have no friends now. I have very little in the way of belongings and I have no friends but I hang on to my life. My life is more to me than any object. If this were not so, I would not be here. I am alone all the time. I often feel very very lonely. Sometimes I go to the park and just sit or sleep outside as it less frightening for me.’ (Irfan, aged 20, Manchester)

There is an emergency created by current systems when people fleeing for survival encounter the exclusionary systems of border controls, which are refinements of longstanding and racist systems of immigration control, instigated in the old imperial heartlands and white colonies at the moment of the ‘post’-colonial end of Empire (Wroe, Larkin & Maglajilic 2019).

In the UK, the Border Agency imposes a complex set of rules and a hostile environment which makes it clear to asylum seekers that they are suspect from the start and that their

presence is not wanted. All this makes the pressure on projects overwhelming to exclude asylum seekers from support. Like the asylum seekers themselves, projects that seek to support asylum seekers may do so only under limited circumstances, since they have 'recourse to public funds' only while an asylum claim is being processed and even then only of a reduced kind. Irfan's account includes experiences of loss and violence that are hard to hear and this fact alone makes him subject to extremes of isolation and loneliness.

In the situation of exile and of experience and fear of repeated trauma, there is the most intense loss of family, community, language, familiarity of place and culture. Irfan's difficulties arise from the most traumatic circumstances, but the social work and education systems he was supported by initially did not recognise this and were unable to continue to support him as they were not resourced to do so. This failure of recognition is systemic and is what builds the 'hostile environment.' He has become isolated and marginal. Irfan's move further and further into the margins of the city is a move that he makes from a sense of a need to protect himself, but in doing so he becomes more vulnerable. The fact that he was in contact with a housing project at the time of the research was a sign of hope, but he was already becoming entrenched in patterns of isolation that will have made it much harder for him to re-engage or to be re-engaged with. The trauma and loneliness of fleeing a familiar life have been intensified by actively oppressive and neglectful systems both at the border and subsequently, when welfare, education and health systems take on the work of the Border Agency.

If loneliness requires a response that is a sufficient sense of closeness to meet our emotional needs, then the loss of home and the imposition of exile as a result of becoming a

refugee suggests a systemic and definitional form of loneliness. Hence the use of exile is a form of punishment.

In this chapter, some of the extreme experiences associated with loneliness among young people have been discussed. Although they are experiences that are not common, we have shown their significance for discussions of what is problematic in wider social relations and for the emerging new narrative about loneliness that we are proposing here.

<1> Chapter 9: Being left out

On the Loneliness Playlist created at the start of the research process, Radiohead's song 'Creep' epitomised the rejection and loneliness of being seen as weirdo and ostracised. The sense that 'I don't belong here' resonated throughout the research. Failing to be picked for a team…being the one left standing…not succeeding in a competition: these may all be commonplace experiences in children's lives, but they are no less painful for being common. The misery of a child never picked to play for a team is powerful. The song 'Creep' encapsulates the self-hate that is involved with the experience of not fitting in.

This chapter presents the experience of being left out and other experiences of not fitting in from a variety of perspectives. Ranging from the ways in which children and young people are horrid to one another, to how adults maintain control of groups by harnessing the power of exclusion, this chapter focuses on the micropolitics of exclusion and control.

This chapter also works with the Black feminist Audre Lorde's engagement with difference as a source of experience. Audre Lorde's work is now being re-engaged with by a new generation of feminist activists and scholars and her essays and poetry are being republished (Lorde 1984). An extract from Lorde's extensive writing on this subject of responding to difference is worth quoting at length at the beginning of this chapter:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance. Ageism. Heterosexism. Elitism. Classism. It is a lifetime pursuit for each one of us to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. For we have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living. Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human

difference as a springboard for creative change.

The importance of Lorde's work and words in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1980s and 90s can carry over into our thinking and praxis in a very different and new moment. Children and young people are still learning to fear difference and are forced to face its distortions in systems that oppress them and us. Lorde sees the sometimes voluntary and sometimes imposed isolation they experience as resulting from treating difference as an insurmountable problem rather than as a resource for living creatively. This distorted and oppressive response to difference remains a major source of loneliness. In this chapter we are considering examples from young people who experienced being cold-shouldered without knowing why; from the experience of autism; and the experience of 'queer' and trans* young people.

<2> Being cold-shouldered

The feeling of knowing you're not wanted, the feeling of not fitting in, is instant; it can grow stronger over time or it can flicker and then fade. It's a feeling in the gut, drawing on a desire to fit in, which is instantaneous with knowing that you do not and cannot.

You know you sound it out, that difference, every time you open your mouth, even when you are trying to pass, and are confident that you might pass just this once, if you keep your mouth shut. But still, failure in the task of knowing what to do to look normal and appear to fit in is absolute. You are from another planet, and you don't know how to be alongside everyone else in an everyday way round here. It's no big deal, this pain you are feeling so acutely. What is it, the inner whispers and adult teachings suggest, to be marked out as

weird and different, compared to the pain and suffering of those whose children are starving or have been blown up by a landmine?

Young people learn early that this kind of pain has no importance and no significance. 'Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.' Part of the current generation of young people are stigmatised as the 'snow flake generation': the ones who want safe space and trigger warnings and all kinds of respect for their choice of pronouns and who, in the opinion of their bruised elders, need to toughen up and learn to take the knocks. Despite this difficult context, not fitting in and being left out was one of the most frequently mentioned features of the experience of loneliness in our research, often times related to an online and social media experience.

> 'I came to Manchester as a student and I think being different here is easier than being different in a small town. But I can see that it might not make that much difference when you are 13 and having to face school.' (Kate, aged 20, Manchester)

> Some girls can be horrid to other girls by saying they are ugly or fat or something and then the one who is left out gets lonely.' (Luke, aged 12, Stoke)

<2> Autism as loneliness

> 'My cousin is autistic and is always different and picked on. He wears noise softeners and the teacher picks on him and says he isn't paying attention and makes him take

them off even though he needs them because he is very sensitive to noise because of autism. But the other kids have started to call him Dr Who and he wears a scarf and it's all right…' (John, aged 12, Stoke)

The fear of difference in many secondary school cultures became a key topic of discussion in our research group. The normative culture embodies institutionalised distortions of difference in forms of oppression and rejects aspects of embodied subjectivity which may feel precious, closest to an authentic sense of self and are often, as a result of institutionalised oppression, the sites of the greatest vulnerability. As the second quote highlights for example, autism may be a very significant difference that is lived as an experience of loneliness. However, the responses to this difference are not created by autism but by the normative culture of sociality that rejects and fears neurodiversity.

According to the National Autistic Society (2018) autistic people are four times as likely as the general public to be lonely. They say that:

> More than 1 in 100 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum. Most autistic people want more friends and connections but many find forming and maintaining social relationships difficult and confusing. The difficulties autistic people can face filtering out the sounds, smells, sights and information can leave them feeling overwhelmed and anxious in busy public spaces. Combined with anxiety about the public misunderstanding their distress, it can be hard to go out at all. Without appropriate and accessible support and services, many autistic people fall into isolation and this can lead to loneliness.

But as the statement above shows, the loneliness does not only derive from isolation or from the condition of autism. It derives also from a punitive approach to difference, exemplified by the teacher who was drawing a boundary of control in the classroom by making the child remove their noise-softening headphones.

<2> The well of loneliness

Even when norms seem to have shifted to a greater inclusivity and acceptance of 'difference', the experience of being 'the only one' in a group or the 'only one' left out of a group is clearly isolating and can be made more so when it is mobilised by others in the interests of retaining power and control. The joke about 'the only gay in the village' still hurts.

The appearance of a shift towards greater inclusivity can in part be explained by the mobilising of difference in marketing strategies by commercial companies, such as the use of the rainbow symbol in shops during Pride celebrations. The research project showed however that the appearance of an inclusive culture is belied by experience for some young people. Significant examples of loneliness considered in this chapter are from young people exploring non-normative gender and sexuality, growing up as lesbian, gay, queer, trans*, intersex, pansexual or exploring and claiming other emergent non-binary or non-heterosexual namings of their lives and humanity. In what follows, for the sake of brevity, we have chosen to use the terms queer, and where we are referring specifically to a gender experience, trans*.

The mobilisation of 'difference' as a means of exerting power has been the subject of feminist and critical race theory based enquiries from the period of Audre Lorde's writings

onwards. Such bodies of enquiry shaped the queer theory to which we now turn. The feeling of 'being different' and being alone because of it was strongly associated in our research with the experience of growing up 'non-normative' or 'queer', in terms of both sexuality and gender. This was mentioned in every location in which we undertook research, but was explored especially in the Manchester group:

> 'I was in the sixth form and I was staying on for some reason into the third year sixth exams and all my friendship group had moved on. I was the only one left but it didn't feel as if there was much point making new friends as there would soon be another move to make. So I settled for keeping my head down and being quiet because of what had happened before. One girl was 'out' and very happy about it, and I shared my own feelings with her, in the strictest confidence. A few days later a rumour started circulating that I had 'come on' to her, and every-one stopped talking to me and ignored me. There was so much spitefulness. It's better to be on your own.' (Ruth, aged 19, Manchester)

The discussion by queer theorists of the politics of normativity can greatly assist understanding of what is happening here, and of the ways in which power play can render isolation one of the most severe of punishments. Kokofsky Sedgwick's (1991) classic work *The Epistemology of the Closet* pointed to the very different view of the world that emerges in the work of queer artists, who were recognised as artists and whose homosexuality was an open secret, both known and not known to the establishment who praised their work. The knowledge developed from this position illuminated many of the secrets of the hegemonic culture, rather in the way servants had knowledge of the secrets of their

masters' bedrooms, through their knowledge of stains and secretions on the bedding. In the same way, 'being different' is marked, stigmatised and often experienced as a very lonely place, but can also become a position of strength and superior knowledge. One of the earliest novels to explore lesbian experience was, after all, called 'The Well of Loneliness.' In this chapter, we are actively drawing on the insights into the nature of the normative and its dirty secrets created through the work of 'queer theory'.

After all, strange and disturbing as queer loneliness in many forms can be, it is largely regarded by those in our research team and others to whom we spoke, as a better alternative than attempting to 'pass' or being a normal heterosexual:

> 'When I left school I started to question my gender and sexuality. For example, I can pass very well as a boy. I grew up in the care system but when I left school last year I moved into a 'leaving care' supported accommodation place. It's really hard and I'm not being looked after. Everything feels overwhelming and big after being in the care system where everything is done for you. It is really hard to make the effort to stay in touch with new people. I've got one relative, an uncle, but I can't talk to him as he is really bigoted. I am frightened about being alone and I'm also frightened about the area I'm living in. I feel like I'm living in a mainly Muslim area and I'm not Muslim. I'm frightened of going to college as I don't think they will accept me. I am very, very lonely.' (George, aged 17, Manchester)

Statistically, it is more than likely that people identifying as other than heterosexual are in a minority and it is even possible that in some schools or neighbourhoods there is only one

trans*, gay, bi, pan or non-binary person. That person may be 'the only gay in the village', and that is undoubtedly an isolated and lonely position to be in.

The process of 'coming out' too is complex, whatever the external situation. Not being out puts up an extra barrier to closeness, as it can seem as if all friendships are based on a misapprehension of reality. It is paradoxical that the 'difference' associated with not being straight may now seem to be the cause of not being able to connect with others, and that is all more the painful as our sexuality is, for many people, almost completely bound up with our experience of and our capacities for intimate connection. Hiding the part of ourselves that most desires close connection is a very painful position to be in. It implies an inability to be vulnerable with someone else and that, by definition, creates loneliness. Early experiences of rejection and bullying, such as Ruth experienced and presented in the extract above, can be sources of difficulty in taking the risk of being seen for who you really are.

Similarly for George, there was no supportive network in which he could feel safe presenting himself in his masculine gender (he had been assigned as a girl at birth) and there were multiple other factors impacting on his sense of security, having recently left the care system. His sense of being alone, and being the 'only one', of intense social isolation, had nevertheless not prevented him from identifying as a trans* man. This conveys a sense of the significance of these aspects of identity for George and for many other young people, of the courage with which they seek to live their lives, and of the intensity of loneliness felt when this cannot be shared in close relationships of friendship or intimacy.

Finally, one young person in a trans* youth group used humour to tell a story of what it is like to feel utterly different and alone:

> ‘X is a skeleton called X. The skeleton identifies as non-binary. No one will live with them. They are socially awkward and can’t get a proper job because they are a skeleton. They are making money on the internet. The only job they can find is at Hallowe’en being scary. They want to do something else but they are very scared because being different they are always treated differently’ (X, Manchester).

A large majority of trans* young people experience bullying in school, and many experience difficulties in their family support systems. Despite the energy and commitment of trans* youth groups who consistently challenge the invisibility (at best) and intense transphobia and hate speech (at worst) of the current international media, the level of attempted suicide among trans* young people is reported as high. The establishment of trans* youth groups is one very important and indeed life-saving response to this, as are supportive youth groups who act as allies to trans* young people.

The story of the skeleton suggests however both another epistemology of the closet and also of the skeletons in the cupboard of heteronormativity. This skeleton is of course the ultimate misfit. The cure for misfitting, in a neoliberal perspective, is to support and encourage moves towards particular kinds of intimacy based on that of the married heterosexual couple: monogamy, friendships with other married couples, a lack of need for extended care or support. The lonely queer is after all still likely to be seen as immature, deviant and a negative force. It can even be suggested that these lonely and deviant queers are contributing to a widespread epidemic of loneliness and failure to be happy, which needs to be cured by conformity. But the knowledge which the skeleton in this narrative is

holding on to is that of their own truth and authenticity. The skeleton is a skeleton and it cannot, nor it seems does it wish, to be cured.

In addition, it can powerfully be claimed that this story of the skeleton is simply and straightforwardly an everyday experience of loneliness, an everyday personal experience that can become political, just as affirming being queer and trans* becomes political. The story of the skeleton allows us to consider that all skeletal humans may be prone to loneliness. In owning and recognising this loneliness, we may be driven to consider the ways in which an experience of empathy, sociality and relationality could change us, and enable us to make our own 'families of choice' , elective affinities and kinship networks. It can also lead to affirmation of solidarity with other social experiences of loneliness based on exclusion and competition as drivers of a racist, sexist and able-ist capitalist system that mobilise distortions of difference as division precisely to prevent solidarity. We could, returning to Audre Lorde's terms, begin to see all our human differences as resources for creative change.

<2> Feelings of failure and disappointment/not being able to share the loneliness

Normativity therefore can be seen operating not only in the isolation and loneliness of queer experience, but also in the loneliness at the very heart of the system that uses and distorts difference as a vehicle of oppression. For, it emerges, there is the sense that any-one, even people who are apparently doing really well, can experience loneliness, and that the negativity and isolation embodied in loneliness make it hard to share. Loneliness is stigmatised, and so loneliness is lonely and silenced in a society in which the only way is up, to happiness and success.

‘Online, happiness is compulsory. Looking happy online with a drink in your hand. You can’t say: this is really hard and I’m missing you. And sometimes, even when I’ve now done everything I was meant to do, and I’ve succeeded in school and pleased my family and gone to Uni, and I still feel very unhappy and lonely….what now?’ (Patience, aged 20, Manchester)

‘The stereotypical view is that loneliness is your fault; you’ve done something wrong, something terrible’s happened in your life and now you’re alone. You’re old and your family don’t like you so you’re lonely. You’re young and you haven’t done something and so now you’re lonely. Loneliness is a normal feeling. People need to know it's OK to be lonely. It exists. There needs to be acceptance of it. It’s the label of loneliness that’s the problem. If it’s just ‘I was doing that by myself’ then it’s okay. But if you call it loneliness or say they are lonely and it’s like ‘whooah’. Something kicks in… and they think it’s so simple, if you’re lonely go make some mates…so why are you lonely?’ (Rosa, aged 23, Manchester)

The other side of this experience of compulsory happiness is the denial of unhappiness, and this could be at the root of the cold shouldering we discussed earlier in this chapter. This can be called a Fear of Missing Out, but in a more active form it is practiced as cold shouldering and an intense lack of empathy.

‘Is there are word for ‘hanging out with a lot of people you don’t really like, just because if you don’t you won’t have anyone else to be with?’ (Mark, aged 19, Manchester)

‘No one needs to be alone in our school; no one needs to be lonely. They should just pull themselves together, make an effort, come and sit with people and join in.’ (Victoria, aged 15, Manchester)

‘I thought they liked me but the next time I saw them they turned their backs and wouldn’t speak to me.’ (Jane, aged 23, Manchester)

The vicious and silent punishment which is cold shouldering could be thought to have one of its sources in the violence which institutionalised fear and rejection of difference and which then moves through groups and systems and targets individual lives in experientially and actually random ways.

The impossibility of knowing why one has been chosen for this treatment can resolve itself in practices of self-blame…it must have been the way I look; the way I spoke; the fact that I exist in the world at all. It is this that seems to provoke the vicious punishment and erasure that such cold-shouldering is experienced as. It is as if this is the practice of exclusion pure and simple, and the use of isolation as punishment and power. It is the reason why all parents should be encouraged to think twice before using ‘go to your room’ as a punishment.

One of the young research team summarised the importance of the theme of loneliness as follows:

> 'Tell them that Youth Loneliness exists.
>
> Tell them that we need to be able to talk about it without being ashamed of it.
>
> Tell them it's a real thing that really, really hurts. It's painful.
>
> But it might not be the worst thing and that it does not need to go on for ever. It can come to an end.'

Another emphasised the issues of difference and connection:

> 'Loneliness means something different to everyone because everyone experiences things differently. But I don't think people should be afraid of loneliness. All your emotions are important… if you're lonely it means it you're missing out on something, you need that social connection.'

The distortion of difference as a vector for violence and oppression and consequent loneliness is one of the most troubling findings of this study. Using difference as a resource for creativity and connection is one of the most significant positive findings of this study. It is a major source for the practices of friendship that are explored in the third section of this book.

<1> Chapter 10: Online Spaces and Connection

It is seemingly paradoxical that the most connected generation in human history, young people *now*, are lonely. We were once promised the Internet would be populated by interfacing 'netizens' and 'digital natives' experiencing greater personal and global connection, increasing cultural understanding that in turn augured an era of peace and co-operation (Hauben 1995; Prensky 2001). In 2006, 'You' was voted the Time Person of the Year in recognition of the unnamed masses that contributed, commented and posted online (Time 2006). Books with titles such as 'Wikinomics' (Tapscott & Williams 2006) and 'Here Comes Everybody' (Shirky 2008) described how Internet technologies were redefining business, society and our lives through mass collaboration online. Yet within decades we face the apparent negative consequences for young people's social and emotional lives.

A prominent theme in the loneliness media discourse is that social media *makes* you lonely (Redhead 2019; Obordo 2018), diminishes mental health and, with sustained use, *causes* conditions such as depression (Campbell 2019; Wakefield 2018). There are studies that identify links between young people's use of social media and declining wellbeing, mental ill health and loneliness (Kross et al. 2013; Appel, Gerlach & Crusius 2016; Woods & Scott 2016; Booker, Kelly & Sacker 2018). There is, however, research that details the various positive affordances of social media and online communities for young people identifying as LGBTQI+ (Hanckel et al. 2019). Writers present persuasive cases that social media technologies are relentlessly designed, developed and refined to be addictive in order to maximise our attention and so capture more of our valuable data (Seymour 2019). Neuroscience research, however, remains contested over whether social media is addictive or is significantly 're-wiring' young people's brains as is sometimes feared (Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017).

In this chapter we question the simplistic and deterministic relationships between youth loneliness or young people's experience of growing up with social media and the Internet. Indeed, we should locate our contemporary debate in the historical series of moral panics about new technologies. As with the Internet and social media, the birth of the landline telephone was seen as both a threat to friendship by displacing face-to-face communication and an opportunity to connect lonely people, especially in rural places (Thomson 2016).

A youth studies perspective frames this research and so our starting point is defined by what is new, novel and transformative about social media and online connection, and how young people are making sense of and creatively engaging with it. There were many occasions throughout the research where familiar or recognisable youth experiences were now transformed and somewhat disfigured through the intensification of social media.

In one workshop we used scenario-based methods to explore how young women use social media. The discussion tapped into established cultural practices of young women enjoying getting dressed-up together to go out or as some sort of ritual performance. Yet the youth co-researchers developed a scenario from their composite experiences of a young woman alone in her bedroom, taking and posting photos on Instagram of her putting on make-up and seductive clothes, with an excited expression on her face. In the final scene, however, she is sat at home on the sofa still wearing make-up but in a comfy tracksuit. All dressed up and nowhere to go but a number of photographs posted online promoting for her and her followers a more preferable present.

Another unusual but recognisable experience was hearing of young boys describe playing online collaborative games such as Fortnite or watching YouTube clips of tother players playing Fortnite. This is in principle not so different or a combination of previous youth activities where young people would go on missions to do or find something, play 'run off' or hide-and-seek, play computer games, or watch team sports on television.

The continuities in the concerns between historic and contemporary debates about landline telephones and social activities (e.g. dressing up) in a digital context ought not to lull us into complacency, however. Although we might be able to find analogues of these contemporary Internet-mediated youth activities it is important to recognise that these are significantly different. Players on Fortnite might talk to their friends while playing the game but it is a highly compelling action game in which players battle the clock and each other to brutally murder other player's avatar. Whether we are concerned about this depends whether our concern is with young players talking to one another through an online game and so may reduce loneliness or whether we have a broader focus on childhood obesity and well-being.

Frank Pasquale (2015) provides an instructive analysis. Corn is a healthy food yet its intensification into corn syrup is a significant contributing factor to obesity. Chewing coca leaves helps people live and work at high-altitudes in the Andes yet its intensification into

cocaine and crack cocaine makes it highly addictive. Similarly, people are in the main curious about one another, have drives to connect and understand themselves and one another collectively. At root we are yearning for connection and to find meaning with other people, which is an important and optimistic point. Yet, again, it is the intensification of this curiosity and the ways in which the urge to connect is mediated through the social media technologies of platform capitalism that is problematic (Srnicek 2017). Social media promise to help us make and keep in contact with friends (e.g. Facebook), pursue an exciting and tailored romantic and sexual life from the comfort of our chair (e.g. Tinder), or stay informed and entertained (e.g. Twitter). However, these technologies are developed to stimulate computable human interaction imposing the extraction of value as behavioural surplus on our collective territories of social connection and friendship (Zuboff 2018). Thus the spaces and technologies of young people's social connection, friendship and indeed attention have to various levels of completeness been captured for the extraction of value by some of the richest, smartest and most powerful corporations humanity has yet created or encountered.

<2> Contextualising social media

An unexpected but arguably unsurprising realisation we made early on in the research was how normal the Internet and social media were to young people, especially in stark comparison to how unusual and epochal we – the adult researchers – perceived them to be. The age difference between the academic researchers and the youth co-researchers meant there were significant generational differences in our transitions from youth and adulthood. Marked amongst these were the times and extent we had transitioned from an analogue life through more complex formations towards being digital selves. Reflecting on the pervasiveness of social media and Internet technologies we older academics had a tendency to return to the idea that social media and Internet technologies were so ubiquitous that they must be interesting and powerful ways of explaining youth loneliness. This is not to say that the young people we worked with during the research thought the Internet was uninteresting, safe or benign but rather it was part of their broader experience of life, even if that life was often mediated by Internet-enabled devices.

The current generation of young people are growing up in a world in which an individual might have thousands, hundreds of thousands or millions of *followers* or *friends* online. In

Peplau and Perlman's (1982) classic definition, loneliness is the difference between perceived or desired social connection and the actual level of connection someone feels to have. A question we might ask is whether the inflation in the quantity of *possible* connection due to the abundance of Internet-mediated social relationships create new desires and expectations of connection, friendship and popularity?

The young people we spoke to had more complex understandings of online relationships that went beyond simple quantities of connection but that also seemed to re-draw the bounds of relationship statuses. we heard a number of times young people describe friendship in quite a narrow sense, for example, 'Friends are people you know will *never* let you down.' (Sonya, 21 years old) Such an attitude is different to what might be recognisable to older generations where a friend could describe most people you knew and liked. What seemed more important was not that someone has, for example, 20,000 followers on *Instagram* but rather they had 20,000 followers because they have an active timeline of images with them on holiday, on beaches, surrounded by friends and having an incredible time.

danah boyd (2014) writes that young people today are growing up online and in public. Once not having a friend or being isolated might have been a private and personal matter. No doubt this time of invisibility and silence may have been hard to endure. Yet, perhaps there was some relief that being alone was not or did not feel like a public and visible matter. Through social media young people now, however, are potentially constantly in contact with other young people and their peer group. We can think of the opportunity to post on Twitter or Instagram as an empty box casting a question over every event in our life, minute-by-minute is this a Tweetable moment? Is this moment Instagramable? If not, why not?

The young people we spoke to recognized the pressure and risks of social media. Social media presented a continued pressure to communicate oneself in a particular way, as leading an interesting and enviable life. It was recognized that too much social media was unhealthy or dangerous, or using social media in unhealthy ways could lead to a series of pressures to be something else or to seek attention or validation from others,

> Social media is social pressure... people posting fake happiness. That has to be one of the loneliest places, with so much inner unhappiness and faking it on

> line. So all your connections are based on falseness. (Rosa, Manchester, aged 21)

The research team accompanied the youth co-researchers to a local theatre to watch the compelling *I'm Standing Next to You* – a play about youth loneliness. The audience stood in an open space as three actors moved amongst us depicting their character's life as a lonely twenty-something as they sought and struggled to make connection and meaning in their lives through social media. One scene featured a young male struggling with paranoia, and sat at a desk doing a data entry job that he did not find meaningful. The final insult was checking his phone to see an endless Instagram feed of more interesting lives being lived elsewhere. Afterwards one of the co-researchers explained the resonance of this part of the play to his life,

> I was him! It's crazy! Sitting at the desk. Clock not moving and you're desperate to go. You check the clock. Not moved since you last looked. You check social media. There it is. Pictures of people on a beach in Melbourne… And, damn, you're just sitting there. (Gil, Manchester, aged 23)

This feeling is described by the acronym, subject of research and focus of countless Internet memes *FOMO* (the Fear of Missing Out).

There are of course many reasons why a young person may be missing out: they may not have been invited or they may not be able to afford to attend the social event,

> It's terrible if you see that everyone's having a party online and you can't afford to go because you can't even afford to buy sausage rolls. You have to go to the food bank but you aren't going to go to the foodbank because it's so undignified. We've seen that a lot. (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

It was strange – as young people are aware of the risks of social media and that they share these risks together – that it was only in relation to social media that the young people we spoke to about loneliness were anything other than sympathetic. During a scenario-based workshop on using social media we talked about 'over sharers' – social media users who post too frequently usually mundane details about their lives or perhaps over share very personal information about themselves. We heard young people exclaim things like 'I hate those people!' and when we co-created and explored vignettes of problematic social media

activity, participants began to judge other young people, in some cases quite harshly. For example, this is a young man talking about an imaginary young woman while developing a social media user vignette:

> She's one of *those* girls, and sorry to anyone of you [he points at girls across table and they immediately shake their heads denying the association] that have this... she's got 'only god can judge me' on her profile pic [the room laughs] but then she's posting posing in the toilets with her friends all the time. (Mo, 19 years old)

Much has been written about the apparent pressure on users of social media to post content online. Thinking of social media as an addiction is interesting because we can see recognisable youth attitudes to their potentially addicted peers' behaviour. Thus we might say there is a pressure to be sociable, gregarious, to drink, take drugs and have sex yet there is a tendency for social conservatism in blaming other young people that become an alcoholic, addicted to drugs or become pregnant. We see equivalent attitudes to social media usage in that young people might feel a pressure to post online, and gain followers and likes. However, 'thirst traps' describe *problematic* online engagements where a young person posts, for example, increasingly revealing images of himself or herself wearing fewer clothes because they receive likes or follows in proportion to how and how much they reveal (Safronova 2017).

Despite the apparent disdain for heavy and problematic social media use, we witnessed changing and emerging attitudes and relationships of care. Some young people we spoke to seemed to understand that the nature of social media channels means that they are active and have agency in participating and influencing what other young people see and the consequences for them,

> What does it mean to other people? It's like the likes. I'm addicted to likes! You get that quick little buzz. Then you question it. Question the way I behaved. Question, posting *it*. Like I was saying, I was destroying my body... [but] we live in a society that idolizes celebs and all they do is post pictures of them doing drugs and drink and all that. (Mark, aged 25, Manchester)

We need to track and work to amplify these emerging practices of care that help young people to individual and collectively to navigate the pressures of growing up online.

One young man, Luke (21 years old) explained that he had deleted his social media accounts when he felt isolated and depressed, 'It's just another window for someone to throw abuse through... So I quit it all.' At the time, this was seen as an example of cyber-bullying but the idea of the 'window' speaks to the transparent and open barrier between the interior and exterior of young people's lives.

<2> Online connection

We were reminded of the importance of distinguishing between social media and the Internet, and the positive uses of social media in contrast to the frequent negative portrayal in the media. Internet-mediated connection is sometimes perceived as being a thinner or more constrained form of social relationship, compared to some sort of authentic face-to-face interaction. However, we spoke to young people for whom playing online computer games with their friends was what they did in the winter because it was too cold to go out and play football. For others, the Internet was a place where they could make significant friendships that were not possible for them in their community,

> I have a friend I met online. I will never meet him, as this friend lives in Australia. But it's such an important friendship to me and it helps me avoid loneliness. (Arthur, 21 years old)

For some young people in the LGBTQI+ community but living in socially conservative communities where it is not okay to 'come out' or where they cannot find allies and friends, the Internet can literally be a lifeline offering hope and a happier future,

> I have found on-line friendship and support as a trans* young person exploring my gender and also as someone with autism in a way that I would never have found possible. I am not 'out' anywhere except here in this youth group and on-line. It has saved my life. (Elsie, Manchester, aged 19)

The majority of the young people we spoke to were positive about the possibilities and potentials of the Internet, and it is important to remember that the Internet is not social media or Facebook. We spoke to two girls who made friends using Google translate in a school where the staff created a 'friendship hub' but all the students knew not to go their for help,

> So she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Portuguese. But we use Google Translate on our phones to talk to one another. (Faith, 16 years old)

In our many encounters with young people, we found that young people were creative and resourceful in their engagement with social media but that individually were bound the collective participation of their friends and peers on social media.

<2> Expanding collective youth capacities

Working with and listening to young people about their creative uses of technology was both inspirational and troubling. There is a tradition of research that explores the diverse ways young people engage with the affordances of technology, where it becomes an additional dimension to their digitally augmented selves (Mullan 2018). Nevertheless, young people's voices are typically not made audible and heard in discussions about technological developments (boyd 2014). Even if young people's engagement with technology – from popularising texting, to inventions in dialect and syntax – they and their data are in effect the targets of companies developing technologies to maximise the extraction of value. Dwarfed by the scale and value of mainstream social media applications and social media channels, we were drawn towards a tradition of research that seeks to co-design and co-create social media and Internet technologies *with* and *for* young people (e.g. Collin & Swist 2016). As the research progressed towards its legacy stage we wanted to take one of the recommendations and develop a practical and actual product, practice or new way to cohere and expand young people's collective capacities.

Throughout the research we had heard young people describe the various pressures imposed by social media. The desire for *like*s, the imperative to be more popular and interesting than was really the case, and to perform and evidence a potential alternative of oneself was a significant set of concerns. The intensities of visible absences in one's timeline and witnessing one's absence from a more enjoyable present in the form of FOMO or the fear and pain of missing out were common experiences of the intensification of online social connection. Moved by these insights, we wanted to include this issue of FOMO in the research recommendations. So we called for those interested in the youth loneliness agenda to,

Recognise the additional pressures that social media can have on young people, but also recognise the positive relationships and connections that social media can offer.

Our rationale was that social media has addictive properties but that we also the positive potential to enable young people to create and maintain contact when feeling lonely or isolated. It is not clear, however, what 'recognising the additional pressure' might look like and who will be recognising this, when and how. We might imagine, for example, a parent, practitioner in a school considering not enforcing a complete and permanent withdrawal from social media or instituting blanket ban. Yet what about the quotidian experience of young people experiencing this tension between the desire and benefits to connect through social media and the fears or feelings of engaging with a technology with addictive properties?

People who score highly on a scale for addiction to Facebook, experience an expansion of time when not using Facebook or social media, significantly over-estimating the time that has passed (Turel, Brevers & Bechara 2018). This subjective expansion of time speaks to the experience of time dragging and the continual checking of a phone for notifications, trying to resist the temptation to check, and then checking the phone anyway. We are interested in exploring the forms of support, repertoires of social practice we could develop with young people, and how we share or amplify to build collective capacities and forms of care.

There is already a range of resources for young people to draw upon to help them manage their online lives, especially in addressing anxieties caused by FOMO. The campaign National Day of Unplugging is an online community of people who unplug for one day a year and, apparently without irony, post content online about their digital detoxes. There are countless memes on, for example, Instagram with two boxes with 'my life on the Internet' featuring a 'rock star' playing guitar in front of an adoring crowd next to another box with 'my life in reality' with a far less glamorous image. There are images shared by well-being 'influencers' with the poses and lighting which portray their bodies in more or less *attractive* forms. Yet the young people we spoke to already know the representations of lives being lived online are not *real*. The effect is far subtler, with the gradual pulls and hailing towards different forms of themselves they desire to be. The FOMO memes, for example, present yet more online content to scroll through and perhaps feel guilty about. I should not feel as

though I am missing out. If I could create such content with me performatively not missing out I might have more followers.

As part of a legacy project to *Loneliness Connects Us*, we wanted to explore a collective and creative response with young people to bridge youth co-research and youth social action. We thought it was important that young people could come together to discuss the pressures and pleasures of social media platforms. As we develop further in Chapter 12, we were interested in the relationships and potentials between creativity, solidarity and solitude.

Creativity has become a catchall for positive change, and is persuasively critiqued as a form of neoliberal appropriation (e.g. Mould 2018), but it is a value that we committed to, in part, reflect and align with the creativity and inventiveness of youth culture. Throughout the research and beyond we are struck by the creativity with which young people adapt technologies, invent new dialects and syntaxes, and participate in sub-cultural activities from feminism to the school climate strike. We wanted to explore a different approach to existing ways of working with young people that produce and communicate straightforwardly didactic messages such as, 'don't do drugs' or 'be optimistic about your future.' Socially engaged arts practices present the hopeful and potential, a form of opportunity to enable us to collectively re-imagine our world. There is, however, a recognised critique of the instrumentalisation of creativity and arts practices in social exclusion programmes and youth work (Belfiore 2002). In this context, we ought to be suspicious of instrumentalisation of artistic practices and standards of value, including the instrumentalisation of ambivalence (Ladkin, McKay & Bojesen 2016).

The work was inspired by the work of Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) a 17th Century philosopher whose work spanned scriptural analysis, metaphysics and politics. Spinoza engages with the immanent reality of the relational and interdependent nature of collective life, for example, 'to man, then, there is nothing more useful than man… all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all' (Spinoza 1996, IVP18s). Joy is fundamental in Spinoza to the processes of collective empowerment and emancipation (potentia), and by joy, 'the movement or passage towards a greater capacity for action' (Nadler 2002: 235). Or as Balibar (1998) identifies the significance of communication in Spinoza's Ethics. Reason

and affect form two dynamics of sociability that produce social bonds and thus the foundations of the city and collective life. He explains that, 'passion and reason are both, in the final analysis, modes of communication between bodies and between ideas of bodies. In the same way, political regimes should be thought of as orders of communication…' (p.95) The challenge therefore is to transform these modes of communication in which the immanent power (potentia) of the political society becomes, 'the context of life that is properly 'human', a life that is lived with joy' (p.96). In this, Balibar (1998: 98) describes it, 'the search for a collective strategy of collective liberation, whose guiding motto would be as many as possible, thinking as much as possible (Ethics, VP5-10).' There are interpretations of Spinzoa, however, that see that the cultivation of the imagination and affects as integral to collective projects to thrive in conditions of sociability. Gatens and Lloyd (1999: 33) identify the potential of collective processes of striving and civic friendship through which we might develop a, 'rationally schooled imagination [that] develops its own hopes which, although they can never be free of fear and sadness, offer a freedom and stability that can come to have greater force than the pitiable fluctuations of untransformed passion.' It is through these processes of imagination and collectively striving together that young people might forge this 'rationally schooled imagination' not so beholden to affects of hopes and fears, and the dubious pressures and pleasures of social media.

Nikki Wood, a Manchester-based visual and digital artist, joined the project to work with another group of youth co-researchers to explore alternative ways of thinking about what it means to be young with social media. The young people came from two projects. Kyso is a group of youth dancers and performers based in Moss Side, Manchester. We also worked with Manchester housing association, MSV Housing, to work with a group of young people who were part of an emerging youth assembly for Greater Manchester. As part of this process, we worked with a diverse group of 18 young people, aged between 14 and 22. We began working with this group in a spirit of creativity and speculation to imagine and develop new resources and repertoires of social practice to help young people who were feeling lonely.

An important dimension to the project was to think carefully about the ways in which young people were related to the conversations and emerging insights from the broader project. An important part of participatory and/or co-produced research is to work with young

people as individuals or a group to reflect on and communicate their thoughts and feelings. Yet it is an important step forward to develop ways in which young people can participate in a growing debate of many young people exploring loneliness and belonging through processes of research, rather than static and individual encounters based only on their experiences.

We developed the relationships between the young people and the project through a planned series of activities, beginning with planned meetings between the research team and the adults leading the projects. Then, we invited the prospective members of the group to the project Youth Summit. The day began with performances from a youth theatre group, developed through presentations on the research, explored loneliness in discussions which culminated in the articulation of youth manifestos to reduce loneliness and develop more convivial communities. The group participated in a performance of Missing to playfully encounter loneliness through the life of a young woman that one would not expect to be lonely yet felt so. Then we began hosting weekly sessions with the group and the artist Nikki to explore loneliness through a series of activities to vocalise feelings of loneliness through 'call and response' discussions.

The work is a digital animation that can be viewed through any web browser but should be watched in a booth. The setting is that we feel as though we are listening in to a conversation in a café as young people share their feelings. We see the faces of young people as they talk somewhat hypnotically about their feelings of belonging and being excluded, the situations they like and the ones they try to avoid. There are moments when they talk about their anxieties of missing out and being alone,

> For me, there is a lot of isolation there's a lot of like, if I'm alone with my own thoughts there is nothing I don't think about. I'm more of a negative thinker so I always think about things that have gone wrong in my life and why it's gone wrong and I try to find a way to blame myself for why it has gone wrong. So when I'm with myself it always negative things that happen. (Sofia, 19 years old, Manchester)

The power of performance is hopefully in the warmth, connection and meaning expressed in the conversations. We hear about plans to travel and learn language, and listen as they remember with nostalgia their childhoods:

M: I can imagine it right now, everything I used to think was cool I still do: old movies, old cartoons, power rangers, oh my God.

W: People are like into having chilli sauce with everything and that's just weird for you all.

M: Oh I can't remember what they were called, but you know those things, you would smash it before it got bangs. They used to be like dog balls, the little pop things. Cat bombs.

W: Bratz! You used to love Bratz! I loved Bratz.

Available online, intended to be found by a young person bored and online or looking for something to help them understand FOMO, or be shared by a friend to someone they think it could help. By the standards of online content that rewards brevity counted in seconds; the performance is over 15 minutes and so something that is unlikely to 'go viral.' Instead we hope the performance is something that challenges the temporalities of social media as the immediate need for activity as posting, 'liking' or in notifications. Another orientation is to encourage the viewer to think about those long lost moments, without evidence or images to share and prove them, ephemeral yet still meaningful; or those hoped for events, to travel and to learn languages, things that are not currently being missed. Whether young people will find this resource useful is an open question. Perhaps the process in which young people came together to explore loneliness together, through the immersive theatre performance of Missing or in the various workshops, is where the project was most powerful.

<1> Section 3: Building friendship and connection

We now focus on a range of methods of finding friendship and connection, enabling the complexity of young people's experience to be foregrounded and explored. In this final section of the book there is a full discussion of the creative methods used in the *Loneliness Connects Us* collaborative research, which will give a sense of some of the ways this sensitive topic might be approached and become a theme of courageous conversation.

This section of the book draws strongly on the underpinning understandings of critical youth and community work as a practice of informal/non-formal education and accompaniment from which the research project started and as a practice of education in radical democracy. In particular, it starts from the assumption that there is a great deal to be learned by listening to and attending carefully to the practices which young people are already developing in response to loneliness, tuning in to them and supporting their development, strengthening and amplifying their shared agentic capacities. Youth work's classic emphasis on young people as 'creators not consumers' is to the fore in this part of the discussion.

We return in this section to methods of animation, attunement and amplification/advocacy which we worked with in this research project and explore them in more depth. The question of what it means to give and receive support is explored from the perspective of what 'befriending' might mean. Democratic youth work as a form of radical education and creative practice as a form of socio-cultural animation provide the field of praxis and theorisation for the following chapters. The range of theoretical stimuli we have used here are as eclectic as youth work and

creative engagements themselves: inspired by a variety of writers and thinkers on critical dialogue, on listening and on collaborative forms of enquiry and creativity. But we seek to emphasise throughout this final section the forms of relationality through which new understandings have emerged. We also wish to illuminate the possibility of combining deep listening with an improvisatory creativity through which forms of solidarity can emerge.

<1> Chapter 11: Asking for Help and Offering Connection

> 'Aye, he's my pal…he's a weird kinda pal cos we fight all the time, but he's always watching my back, he's there for me.' (Joe, aged 16, Glasgow)

Joe had spoken eloquently about how he had at times gone away to be alone and face his own feelings that he'd be better off dead. It was immediately after he spoke about that in our discussion session that that he turned to the friend sitting next to him and spoke so appreciatively and honestly of him. To know you have some-one, a pal, watching your back, can be life-saving.

Young people are always creating new ways of finding mutual support as they struggle to sustain connection. This chapter seeks to emphasise the importance of acknowledging young people's activity and agency in this process of building support as well as the agentic networks they are part of.

The difficulties faced in the context of institutionalised and professionalised forms of help are real and these are also explored here. We argue that attention to the resourcefulness of young people and their existing, potential and imagined networks of support could mitigate some of the difficulties faced in the context of professionalised helping.

This chapter also explores the complexity of asking for help and giving and receiving it at a time in life when a growing independence is prized above everything. Young people are often keen not to rely on help from parents or guardians. Parents and guardians

sometimes wish to begin to withdraw from the kind of parenting which young people seem to need. Others may wish to continue with patterns of parenting more appropriate to earlier periods of childhood. Complex family dynamics around support and independence may also be refigured in other settings where adults are seeking to offer help and support to young people. Beyond these intrapersonal dynamics are the environments which 'support agencies' occupy, their friendliness and openness or the high thresholds they offer for engagement, the complex pressures staff face in a period when projects are often underresourced to meet the demand they experience. It is often said in reflective moments among youth work professionals: 'There are no hard to reach young people, but there are many hard to reach support agencies.' The replacement of one-to-one physically present support with online support, referral to websites and other measures that reduce the availability of people when people are needed, is one of the symptoms of projects being managed under conditions of austerity imposed by public policy.

<2> Young people's mutual support

In contrast with professionalised discussions of helping and support, young people's accounts emphasised every day acts, friendliness, conviviality and mutuality.

The small acts and everyday connections presented in this chapter are often ingenious and creative, subtly undermining expectations about status and control. One of the most significant features of peer to peer support is that it can be offered and accepted many times and in many directions, while circumventing and avoiding the influence of parent-child hierarchies.

Asking for help and offering connection emerged as seemingly straightforward strategies for young people experiencing loneliness or anyone looking to help them. Indeed we heard of the power of everyday acts of kindness and friendship, of reaching out and connecting. It is important, however, to remember that unfortunately engaging with loneliness is not so simple. Loneliness is a state that young people might try to ignore, deny or hide. We also have to locate requests or offers of help and connection as performed in relation to life histories, gender, culture, personality, preference for connection, and mental health issues as they intersect with experiences of loneliness: “You can’t keep running to mummy and daddy. You have to cope with things by yourself” (John, aged 21, Norwich).

It was unsettling to hear young people’s concerns about asking for help, and perceptions of the limitations of help. Arguably related to a social imperative to be socially successful and resilient, we heard young people resist asking for help from friends because: “It's hard to talk about [about loneliness] cos it puts pressure on others to be there for you” (Gil, aged 23, Manchester). This young man questioned the capacity of formal support structures, such as counselling, to help. He explained his concerns: “You ask for help. You speak to someone [a counsellor] … but you go back home and it’s all there waiting. Still. It’s just you. I just need to keep doing things and get out” (Mark, aged 25, Manchester). At the time of the research, Mark was experiencing epileptic seizures that were provoking bouts of depression, loneliness and isolation. He was undergoing counselling and participating in a range of social action projects to provide himself with support and distraction from feeling alone and depressed. The ambivalence between a need to keep busy and the possibilities opened up by speaking about distress were powerful for him.

<2> Young people and mutual support: small acts of friendship and connection

Small acts of everyday kindness and friendship emerged as ways that people's lives might be touched to make loneliness seem more manageable or provide support in an otherwise painful time. These acts were often small and yet significant, sometimes coming from another young person or adults that work with them:

"When I was younger I was really ill, in hospital. One of my friends brought revision books to the hospital and worked with me. I was pretty low. A youth worker based on the ward introduced me to others with the same illness" (Paul, Youth Worker, Manchester).

These acts of kindness were acts of friendship. One of our co-researchers explained that friends were different to everyone else in that friends are there when you need them. Although the actions in Paul's story may have been inspired by concern, the motivations did not seem to be constrained or circumscribed by pity but equality, an openness enriched by humour and warmth. These acts often played important functions in enabling young people to feel as though they could join a new group of friends.

These acts of friendship might be one young person reaching out to another:

"I was at a gig by myself and this guy just came up and said you're here by yourself and I'm here by myself. Why don't we hang out together and then we aren't by ourselves?" (Clayton, aged 21, Manchester).

They frequently involved jokes, for example:

> 'I was sitting there by myself. I didn't have anyone to talk to and I didn't know what to do. Then my friend came up to me. She pretended she couldn't open this

box of chocolates. She said, ‘I don’t know how to open this. Please can you help me?’ I laughed and said, I don’t know how to do this. Please can you help me.’ We both fell about.’ (Rosa, aged 18, Manchester)

At root, these acts of kindness reached out to someone and let them know that they were not alone and that someone was reminding them that they belong.

Humour is not unproblematic, however, in encouraging positive relationships. Banter, put-downs, insults and aggressive humour are a perennial part of social relations. We noticed the way however that, while they can be enjoyable and a part of social bonding, they can also engender a fragile and fraught relationship that can make trust more difficult. One of the friendships that emerged in the project was an usual one that nevertheless sustained the work of the research project throughout its course. One of the friends was very accustomed to using banter, often verging on abuse, as a way to connect and a way to fend off connection, and this theme of the ‘bants’ was often discussed in the research team. This odd friendship somehow subverted the impact of the banter through sustained presence and quiet acceptance.

Patience is one of eight leading youth artists that are ‘taking over’ the venue to make it youth centred and create artistic visions of the future of youth. Her project is to create a womb space out of parachute material: individuals crawl into the space and sit on beanbags and chat to one another amongst ambient light and music, then when they are ready they crawl through a small tunnel and are ‘born’ down a slide into a theatre space. The production of this installation in a leading cultural centre was, in addition to the loneliness co-research project, what Patience was doing on just one night of the week. Patience rarely

spoke up during the group meetings, preferring instead to sit and listen, to demur or evade when asked her opinion, and seemed to be peripheral to and bemused by the project. She was most animated when talking about which food option we should choose, which pizza shop we should use, or where we could go for a reward session. Yet her engagement was more than a distractedness or disruption. She was frequently found supporting Mark, when he repeatedly sought to disrupt the discussions through 'banter' and by making provocative or offensive statements. She and her friend Mark enjoyed hanging out together in the community partner's projects. They are an odd couple. Indeed, many remark that it is odd they are friends. He is working class, feels continually marginalised and misunderstood and is interested in rap music, whereas she is middle class, quiet and plays classical piano; yet,they are fast friends. As he would question the right of trans* parents to raise their children as trans*, she would look at the other members of the group with a conciliatory expression: I know this is bad, she seemed to be emoting, but it's okay. He needs to be here. Mark suffered from depression and discussed suicidal ideation. He explained how the group enabled him to get out of his bedroom where his problems wait for him. Mark also recognised that when he is not venting about these hot topics he is a lot of fun, seems much calmer and nicer. But Patience too needed to be here, for reasons that remained unspoken but were somehow connected with a member of her family. As did all involved in the research in some ways, spoken and unspoken. Sustaining a presence in the research team came to be, in itself, a counter against the loneliness we were conjuring.

Friendship means being there for someone when they need you. It was striking the extent to which young people looked to others of their own age, often family members, for support: "Your older brother sticks up for you even though you lost the fight; Your cousin comes and looks out for you; Your older sister asks and asks until you tell her you are gay"

(Kate, aged 20, Manchester). Joe said: “Aye, he’s my pal…he’s a weird kinda pal cos we fight all the time, but he’s always watching my back, he’s there for me” (Joe, Glasgow, aged 16). In this sense, young people find friends with those who act with and for them, who are allies in life’s struggles. They also appreciate the people who take time to listen in an everyday context. Part of the important discussion of listening and paying attention as a key part of friendship emerged in the context of noticing how little school cultures support these mutual forms of support. A friend at school might:

> ‘Take the time to be with you and not interrupt. Notice that you are on your own a lot and ask if you want company at lunch time or at a break time. Listening and paying attention at school is often about listening and paying attention to the teacher and not much support is given to people learning to listen to one another.’ (Kathy, aged 20, Manchester)

Friendship is also seen as involving being company for someone else. There were a number of ways young people had of finding company and keeping company. These ranged from simply phoning and texting to taking up smoking as a way of providing an automatic group to belong to.

Academic studies, like everyday life experiences, can often undervalue friendship even though it is widely recognized as a very important relationship in the period of life when young people may be letting go of the support of their parent(s) or carer(s) and seeking to establish a new identity. Unlike family relationships, friends are chosen; good friends are people who we can talk to and on whom we can rely. They are also people we can enjoy

being with and doing things with. Some young people talked about deliberately taking up a new sport or hobby to try and create new friendships, or of inviting someone else to join them in doing a new and apparently ridiculous thing. One of the practices discussed frequently in the research group was how to initiate and sustain contact that could then become a friendship.

> 'Someone said something really random one year like…who wants to learn the banjo. And somehow then there were all these banjos around and we made a banjo group. Me and A have been friends ever since.' (T: Manchester)

In this way too, shared interests or enthusiasms could potentially take over from other kinds of shared identity that might be the reason a group had come together.

Another important mechanism of connection, especially for young people whose experience of loneliness emerged from the social stigmatization and distortion of their difference, or from social isolation, was a tendency to invest in fantasy games, cosculture, superheroes, musical theatre, science fiction and in the sharing of talismanic objects taken from these spaces. Where human connection was routinely failing, the strategy of connecting through partial objects taken from assemblages of speculative fiction was a powerful strategy for unsettling loneliness: "We are all into superheroes here and I love musical theatre. I know the songs from every single Rogers and Hammerstein musical. Plus some of us go to coscon." Another young person said: "Harry Potter characters are so important: we all know them; we can all talk about them; they can be our guides and the stories tell us so much…"

These superheroes offer a safe connecting point in the fragile and risky place of social bonds. And their power could – if only in imagination - conquer all comers.

<2> Asking for help and the question of power

Requests for and offers of help and connection intersect with flows of power where control can masquerade as care. Such masquerades carry the marks of patriarchal control and class-based symbolic violence as well as being complexly marked by individual personalities and life stories. Those who offer help are seen and experienced as in the powerful position and those who are beneficiaries are seen and experienced as relatively powerless. To ask for help in this context is to appear to place oneself in a position of powerlessness and weakness. For many people, including many young people, this is enough to prevent them reaching out for help and seeking connection.

In many communities, for example, 'strength' is a positive attribute, associated with the ability to endure suffering stoically. Being seen as 'a strong working class woman' for example is a position of value and authority. Someone who is struggling to endure stoically may feel that they are required to toughen up and get on with life, as this is what coping involves. In such a context, asking for help is seen as weakness. Actually, in such contexts and in a strange reversal, the consequence is that asking for help and support is what requires courage.

It requires courage as it involves a certain kind of vulnerability before or alongside others. It is likely that, in asking for as well as in offering help, people have been rebuffed. There is a consequent fear that the request for or offer of help will be refused, and of the feelings of rejection that may accompany this refusal.

Another dimension of the reluctance to ask for help is a certain fear in relation to

dependency. It may be that there has been an experience of being depended on in a way that has been profoundly unequal, and this inequality has become, even if unconsciously at times, a source of resentment. Such an experience can in turn lead to a fear of imposing such inequality and of being a burden on others and becoming therefore an occasion of resentment: “It's hard to talk about [about loneliness] cos it puts pressure on others to be there for you” (Gil, aged 23, Manchester).

Furthermore, asking for help involves an implied loss of control, and if control has, for example, been won with difficulty as part of a struggle for independence, it is hard to risk its loss. A significant feature of young people’s relationships with professionals who might precisely be expected to offer help and support is that such relationships are often conditional and caught up with a bargain of some kind. The bargain may be one in which time is made available, but the young person needs to fit in with the schedules imposed by the professional. Or resources such as food may be made available, but this is accompanied by an expectation to take part in a ‘healthy eating’ course. Help with childcare is made conditional on attendance at a parenting course. Such young person-professional relationships also typically come with a warning that retaining confidentiality may not be in the power of the professional if there is a disclosure of potentially criminal harm to the young person, or to others, known as a ‘safeguarding issue’. This also applies in cases where there is a fear or suspicion of a young person’s involvement with ‘radicalisation’. In this context, the professional is easily seen as having a prior commitment, prior to the act of listening, and within communities where there is a power dynamic of mistrust towards the authorities, such a prior commitment, whilst it is intended to be part of a process and a dynamic of care, is readily experienced as one of control. Such professionals whose first loyalty seems to be to the authorities

are unlikely to be trusted.

Sometimes schools' formal systems are so distrusted that friendship involves navigating what seem to be offers of support and turn out to be dangerous in the name of what seem more real possibilities of support:

> 'My school has a support hub where pupils can go if they are feeling lonely. But you can't go there. It's the last place you can go. No one would use that hub if they were lonely. So this girl started school and she was new and only spoke Portuguese. At that time I didn't have many friends anyway as I used to act up and behave really badly and I didn't understand why but it meant that people were wary of me. Anyway, my advice is maybe look for someone else who seems to be on their own. I got friendly with this girl who only spoke Portuguese. So she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Portuguese. But we use Google Translate on our phones to talk to one another.' (Faith, aged 16, Manchester)

Help can take various forms: practical help with specific problems; listening and exploring in ways that support people to find their own ways forward; and also actual guidance and advice because the person who is turned to is believed to have the wisdom to undertake this role. In one of the most influential texts on help, David Brandon's *Zen and the Art of Helping*, Brandon suggests that 'The real kernel of all our help, that which renders it effective, is compassion' (1990: 60). He continues:

> Compassion is being in tune with oneself, the other person(s) and the whole world. It is goodness at its most intuitive and unreflecting. It is a harmony which opens itself and permits the flowing out of love toward others without any reward. It avoids using people as tools. It sees them as complete and without a need to be changed. (Brandon 1990: 60)

Such thinking about what asking for help might mean in the context of loneliness suggests a most powerful connection between the one who seeks help and the one who offers it. This can be very difficult for people who have been educated to see their professionalism in terms of appropriate distance and impartial involvement. Brandon (as so many since him have been, especially those involved in the survivor movement) is precise about the ways in which being 'helped' can hinder the development and flourishing of those helped. One common way this happens is when bureaucratic and institutionalized methods become an obstacle to listening and come to define the situations and experiences of people who might be considering asking for help. This is what happens when one project's 'signposting' is a young person's 'being passed from pillar to post'. In order to access resources, people often have to either define themselves, or be defined as, in deficit or needy. In such circumstances, according to Brandon: 'Helping is a thin veneer on top of a robust hindering.' To protect against the development of such forms of obstruction masquerading as help, David Ellerman (2006) has argued for five principles:

- Help must start from the present situation of the doers.
- Helpers must see the situation through the eyes of the doers.

- Help cannot be imposed on the doers, as that directly violates their autonomy.
- Nor can doers receive help as a benevolent gift, as that creates dependency.
- Doers must be in the driver's seat.

Ellerman uses the term 'doers' here to emphasise the agency of those seeking support. There is also a growing understanding of the significance of the ways in which an acknowledgement of vulnerability is critical in many support processes. The emotional armour that people use on a daily basis is there to help us avoid feeling shame, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. Alongside these feelings however, compassion can also be crowded out by strategies of toughening or numbing up against the feelings that other people's pain touches, or of avoidance, or of a dampening down of joyful moments in order to prevent the difficulties of disappointment.

Although some young people might want to be alone or experience a form of social anhedonia – the inability to find pleasure in usually enjoyable activities – we heard of various accounts where small acts of kindness, care and generosity helped a young person find connection and reduced loneliness. A trans* young person describes how a youth worker helped them realize that they belonged:

> 'I wish someone would have told me that being *insert LGBT+ identity* is real and valid. I wish someone would have told me sooner that I deserve to be happy and shouldn't always put other people's needs before my own. Thank you for just talking to me and treating me like any other person and not just seeing me as 'the trans* one' in school (i.e., you didn't treat me like I was an inconvenience, or feel sorry for me, or not know how to act when I was around etc, which is how every other

teacher treated me). You made me feel welcome and comfortable (and "normal") at a time when I felt like no one understood, and you'll probably never know how much that helped me. Thank you for believing me and supporting me when I came to you for help. I felt like no one else would listen or take me seriously but you did everything you could to help me figure out what to do. Thank you for supporting and accepting me when I came out as trans*. You didn't make a big deal out of it, but made sure I knew that I had your support.' (Anonymous, Manchester)

The capacity both to treat someone as normal/not at all weird and at the same time to accept their difference is at the heart of the kind of responsive and radical listening which seems to be the best kind of response to a request for help.

Pauline Oliveros (2005), the experimental musician, developed an improvisatory practice of Deep Listening, which drew on both attention and awareness, focal listening and global listening, to create her experimental music. She said that this method was grounded in both Buddhism and feminist theories of the social. We can imagine that the kind of Deep Listening practiced by the teacher in this story was able to embrace both the absolute singularity of the experiences that the young person shared and the planetary context in which gender categories are being opened up once more. It was in each of these dimensions that the storyteller was needing to be heard and was asking for support.

The fundamental practices of support which this chapter has addressed are a key aspect of effective practice in youth and community work, and the nature of friendship both as mutual support and as an element of professional practice has been shown to be a theme worthy of much more investigation by our engagement with young people's own peer support strategies which became evident as a result of the research focus on loneliness.

<1> Chapter 12: Youth Work as a Method

Community-based Youth work was a critical starting point for the whole co-research project and in this chapter we present in more depth the nature of the research partnership with key research partners and the ways this informed the whole research collaboration.

<2> Youth work as engagement

The most important partner in this research was 42nd Street, a project that describes itself as supporting young people aged 11-25 years with their emotional wellbeing and mental health. They describe their offer thus:

> We offer a range of individual therapeutic support and encourage and support young people to have a voice, and access opportunities to learn, develop new skills, be creative, have fun and demonstrate to themselves and others that they are able to recover, manage their mental health and wellbeing and achieve their full potential.

In this self-description it is still possible to hear the resonance with the experience of the detached youth workers whose work in Manchester City Centre led to the formation of 42nd Street forty years ago. There is a strong person-centred and relational approach to practice in the organisation, and the roots of the project in youth work are still evident in the range of groups and activities that run alongside individual therapeutic, counselling and other one-to-one support sessions. There is also an emphasis on young people's voices and claims to rights shaping current and future projects. This work is carried out in a context where enjoyment and enthusiasm are constantly present. Doing things together and having fun is recognised as an important

foundation from which to develop groups in which young people can offer mutual support, build up trust and a sense of safety in order to take risks for change and have access to real opportunities for personal development.

The 18 month-long *Loneliness Connects Us* project was offered as one of 42nd Street's groups, and was staffed by a youth worker, Kurtis Angel. Kurtis was himself a young person within the terms we had set for the project (aged between 15 and 25) and had previously taken part in earlier 42nd Street research projects concerned with young Black men's experience of mental health. Alongside Kurtis, James Duggan and Janet Batsleer also acted as group work anchors and facilitators throughout the year, making an ongoing commitment to be present, to build a strong relationship and a holding environment in which challenging issues could be explored, difficult questions asked and creative steps taken to name and address the theme of loneliness among young people.

The research group took a different shape at different stages of the year and interacted with other groups and opportunities throughout the project. It was at its biggest at the beginning and end; just four or five young people were present loyally throughout and for them the *Loneliness Connects Us* project clearly fulfilled one of the key purposes of community-based youth work: the provision of a place to be, of shared activity and some-one to talk to. Many of the activities we undertook together would have recognisably formed part of a programme in a well-resourced Youth Centre. There were opportunities to take part in discussions; in creative making; in games design. Participants acted as co-researchers in sometimes small and sometimes extended ways, at the design, implementation and analysis stages of the research. There were times for

shared food and drink; for shared music and playlists; theatre visits and shared film lists, and a final creative project, the immersive theatre performance of 'Missing', which also included a tour.

As Sinead Gormally and Annette Coburn (2016) have pointed out, it is not hard to find a nexus between the approach to research taken in this project and youth work processes of engagement. Finding common ground, establishing a fruitful process of critical enquiry, shaping events as creators not consumers, seeking to explore what might constitute flourishing and wellbeing as a basis for ethical practice and for enabling young people's mutual support and development: all these are familiar youth work themes.

The In Defence of Youth Work campaign proposed the following foundations for a critical and democratic youth work practice and these youth work 'cornerstones' have been widely discussed and adopted as a starting point for critical conversations about youth work as informal education and support, both in the UK and internationally (In Defence of Youth Work 2019). They were adopted by this research project as a starting point, and the synergy between them and the methods that we adopted as researchers was strong. These cornerstones refer to:

- The primacy of the voluntary relationship, from which the young person can withdraw without compulsion or sanction;
- A commitment to a critical dialogue, to the creation of informal educational opportunities starting from young people's agendas;

- The need to work with and encourage the growth of young people's own autonomous networks, recognising the significance of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith in shaping their choices and opportunities;
- The importance of valuing and attending to their here-and-now as well as to young people's 'transitions';
- The nurturing of a self-conscious democratic practice, tipping balances of power in young people's favour;
- The significance of the worker themselves, their room for autonomy, their ability to fashion an improvised, yet rehearsed practice.

In the research process, involvement was without sanction and also without payment, other than for the convenor of the group, although some incentives were offered to participants in the form of food and wider opportunities to be part of arts and cultural activities. The whole way in which loneliness was explored began from a conversation within the research group as it was constituted from the beginning (as was discussed in Chapter 3). The social formation of loneliness was on the agenda from the start, as it was common practice in 42nd Street, rooted as it is in traditions of empowerment, to enquire into the experience of social exclusion and discrimination as a major contributing factor to issues with emotional well-being and mental health.

The valuing of the here and now and the development of a democratic practice became particularly evident in the contribution of young people who stayed the course. Here, the youth workers and the researchers were able to support them to develop their own interests and lines of questioning, in one case giving support to an ongoing interest in making radio programmes and in another helping the individual to link up with

academic experts in the fields of psychology and nutrition. But even when a co-researcher attended only one or two sessions, their contribution to that session was valued on a basis of equality.

The young people came to the research project with a variety of connections to 42nd Street as a young people's project and to loneliness as a theme. As we developed more and more ways of linking together, the group became more at ease at sharing experiences. This process of sharing lent itself to a constant reiteration of themes that could then be explored in more depth with other young people, through a kind of 'each one, teach one' process. This continuous development and exploration of key themes is a recognisable method in critical youth work practice, deriving from an engagement with Freirean pedagogies in which 'generative themes' form the basis of a period of work which is co-created by a group and facilitated by youth workers.

Some students undertaking education and youth and community work courses at Manchester Metropolitan University also joined the research process at different stages. For some, this allowed them to explore informal education as a practice in relation to their experience of schooling. Others who were already experienced as youth workers joined the research team as co-researchers. In doing so, historic patterns of linking radical research with youth work practice were being revived (Back 2007; Batsleer 2008).

<2> Youth work as method: the 'cornerstones' in action

The performance of 'Missing', which is discussed in depth in the next chapter, was toured around the following youth projects across the UK, engaging staff and young people. Each of these projects exemplified a unique aspect of youth work practice as it has developed in the

UK and it is hard to summarise this briefly. The following snapshots of the locations and projects that we worked in will however give an indication.

In Norwich and Great Yarmouth we were in partnership with MAP. MAP is a Young People's Advice Project engaged with young people across the county of Norfolk. As discussed in Chapter 4, Great Yarmouth was used as a pilot area for the implementation of a new UK welfare system called Universal Credit. This was having a terrible impact on already struggling families and individuals, who were being left without income for six weeks once they were signed on to the new system as their existing benefit entitlement stopped and the new system involved payment in arrears. Staff also conveyed to us the sense of how rural isolation and the contrast between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' creates a sense of not being cared for or cared about, accompanied by a sense of shame about coming from or having anything to do with the town.

Both young people and staff here gave us a vivid sense of the creativity and resourcefulness that young people can find among themselves to challenge the effects of isolation, and of how poverty and insecure employment impact on the lives of a whole community. The youth work being developed here was focused on detached work and a café project which would provide a place to go and a point of contact for young people. The detached youth workers who were developing this project were local, and had an enormous fund of empathy for the experience of boredom and isolation that many young people faced in a town where there 'was just one road in and one road out'.

There are two aspects of youth work as method that this project highlighted strongly for the research team. The first was the importance of advocacy in youth work that combats loneliness. MAP, as the names suggests, seeks to enable and support young people to find a

path by taking early action to address difficulties as they arise. The project had a strong commitment to young people's rights, and was part of the Make Our Rights a Reality network of projects nationally, which emphasises voice and action concerning those rights. As well as supporting young people to represent themselves and address their own difficulties, the project practices advocacy and, during the time of our research, was strongly addressing the impact that the pilot of Universal Credit was having on families and therefore on young people.

The second important aspect of youth work as method was the practice of street-based ('detached') youth work. Sometimes seen as youth work in its purest form, it involves meeting with young people in the spaces they choose, on young people's own terms, and to work with and from the agendas young people bring to the conversation. During *Loneliness Connects Us*, we met detached youth workers who were building an evening café project in Great Yarmouth at times that were accessible to the young people currently at a loose end on the streets, after the summer season at the seaside resort had ended.

In Ballymena, we were in partnership with N-Gage and the Youth Hub at Start360. Start360 is a Northern Ireland-wide charity dedicated to young people's health and wellbeing. The Youth Hub is at the very heart of the main streets in Ballymena. Gerry McVeigh is a professionally qualified and highly experienced youth worker whose work with the umbrella body, Start360, supported the development of N-Gage. Gerry told us about how the project emerged and was supported through public health initiatives in Northern Ireland. It is an open access and drop-in project that also receives referrals, but all young people who attend do so on a basis of choice. N-Gage seeks to and clearly does build close relationships with participants who come from all parts of the town. The project responds to the 'hidden

4021 harm' that can impact on children and young people. The staff noted the presence in the
4022 town of problematic or shameful drug use (since Ballymena is a town in which heroin took a
4023 hold towards the end of the period of the Troubles). As discussed in Chapter 5, N-Gage are
4024 also alone in the town in having a public commitment to affirm same sex love (shown by the
4025 poster in their window supporting equal marriage), and they host an LGBTIQ* youth group.
4026 Staff talked about sectarianism and its aftermath and consequences, although the young
4027 people did not, and about the loneliness faced by young people living in very isolated rural
4028 farms who do not have access to transport to come into the town and meet friends. This
4029 project worked strongly through a relationship building approach and through the creation
4030 of spaces and opportunities for young people to connect and to develop ways of supporting
4031 one another.

4032 In relation to the discussion of youth work as method, key aspects that emerged in the
4033 context of the Ballymena project were the creation of safe peer group spaces in which
4034 support emerges through participation in enjoyable activities designed with rather than for
4035 young people, but in which horizons are also extended. The N-Gage centre itself was
4036 testimony to this as the group of young people who were core participants in the project at
4037 the time of our research were designing a holistic healing space: a quiet space at the heart
4038 of the project that would be used for meditation but also for a range of alternative
4039 therapies.

4040 This mobilization of youth work as informal learning and support through association was
4041 also clear and present in the way the project used residential experiences. A strong tradition
4042 of using residentials began in the outdoor and adventure education strands of youth work
4043 but has now developed far beyond this. During our visit to N-Gage, two forthcoming

residentials were being discussed: one focused on creative writing, and the other for young women. Workers recognized that these opportunities led to an intensification and an extension of the processes of mutual learning and support already occurring for the groups and individuals meeting in N-Gage.

In Glasgow, we were in partnership with Fairbridge and The Prince's Trust. The projects in Glasgow were slightly different from the other projects we had worked with in the sense that they are part of a national organization, based in the very heart of Glasgow and offering opportunities to re-engage through a structured youth work programme that follows the same model nationally. Young people come to the Fairbridge Programme in Glasgow from throughout the western area of the Central Belt in Scotland. Some of the key aspects of the programme, which begins with an outdoor and adventure education access programme, is that it is based on choice and confidence building. It uses a range of activities such as cooking, creative arts, employment taster sessions and self-care sessions, to support young people aged 16-25 in developing self-confidence before taking up a more specifically employment-focused Prince's Trust programme. Staff conveyed a sense of Glasgow as a dangerous city to be young in at the moment, with an increase in knife crime creating a climate of fear and isolation.

During the period in which we met the Glasgow team at Fairbridge, they articulated for us some key issues that they address through youth work as a method. The most significant was the attention that is given to the processes of engagement and the importance of young people choosing rather than being pressurized into taking part in the Fairbridge programme. It is this voluntary relationship that becomes the motor of engagement and consequent confidence building.

Youth workers work in a low-key way to establish a sense of belonging and engagement among young people who have already become disengaged from the system. Staff talked to us about their deliberate strategies for creating a welcoming environment, the way they use adventure activities to build a group, and the careful 'listening in' they do.

Staff in Glasgow Fairbridge also engaged with us actively concerning the ethics of both youth work and our research processes. During the discussion of the play 'Missing', two young people who were participating talked about the experience of attempted suicide in their own family and friendship circle, and one young man spoke about his own experience of suicidal feelings and how he had found support from a friend. This strongly highlighted the importance of our decision to tour the performance of 'Missing' with youth work organisations where one-to-one support for young people already existed. It also highlighted the centrality of the workers themselves, their communication skills, their capacities for reflective and ethical practice, and the important role of supervision of practice.

In **Rhyl**, we worked in partnership with West Rhyl Young People's Project. This project is based in a few rooms on a small street near the centre of Rhyl. The project has kept going on a variety of shoe strings for many years, with an ethos of fighting social injustice and inequality and building democratic literacy. At the time we were undertaking the research, the project had once more narrowly escaped closure.

We linked up with the regular drop in sessions. Jay, the youth worker, talked about the way they have created groups to make sure that different friendship groups who do not feel confident about encountering others can also use the project. We were told that West Rhyl was a place that has experienced extremes of deprivation and a transient population. At

least a third of the households did not originate from the area, but from Merseyside or Greater Manchester, and the young people's group we worked with included one young man who had grown up in Salford, Greater Manchester. The reasons why people relocate to the North Wales coast are plentiful but none of them escape the challenges of poverty and precarity. The criminal networks of urban areas, or the 'county lines', were also said by the workers to have a hold in the drug culture in Rhyl. There had recently been a murder and a conviction involving young people who were known to the youth workers, creating a deeper sense of isolation and fear, which the youth workers were combating by creating a homely atmosphere and a way of engaging young people in a whole range of opportunities, including outdoor adventures and indoor creativity.

This project was the least well-resourced of all the projects we visited, and perhaps in consequence had a strong DIY ethos, with a sense of a flexible and creative response to the young people that the project encountered and engaged. In terms of youth work as method, this was a space in which the sense of young people as 'creators not consumers' of youth work was strongest.

During the evening, we talked with a group of young people about their self-organisation of a successful and clearly hugely enjoyable camping trip, for which they had raised funds to buy tents for the expedition on EBay and then taken the bus from Rhyl to wild camp in the nearest mountain area accessible at the end of a bus journey. We talked with another group of young people about the organising of an afternoon youth club that enabled them to use the resources available through West Rhyl Youth Project whilst avoiding another group who posed a threat.

<2> Young people and loneliness: youth work, research and social action

In the movement to raise awareness of and provide a contribution to countering loneliness, youth work has had a significant part to play. In partnership with the #iwill Fund, the Co-op Foundation spent £1 million on the 'Belong' network, which has more than 80 members at the time of writing, of which the vast majority are based in youth work projects that are undertaking social action. The #iwill Fund channelled money from the UK Government via the charity 'Step Up to Serve', which was established in 2013 for this purpose. The Charity and Fund are set to close in 2020. The Belong network, based in the Co-op Foundation, seems set to develop from strength to strength and a new network called 'Spaces to Connect' has now emerged.

However, the commitment to 'social action' as a buzzword for youth work should be considered critically. In the same way, a medical model of loneliness which lends itself to the suggestion that interventions by professionals such as social workers or youth workers are needed in order to fix the problem needs to be questioned. We propose seeing youth work and social action projects as part of a social infrastructure designed to facilitate mutual support and enlivening. According to #iwill:

> Currently 4 in 10 young people aged between 10 and 20 get involved in activities that make a positive difference. However, research indicates that almost double this number would take part in things like campaigning, fundraising and volunteering if they had the chance. Further studies confirm that social action develops 21st century employability skills, boosts access to further and higher education and supports enhanced well-being among young people. It creates a

double benefit – to young people AND communities.

The #iwill campaign is working with hundreds of partner organisations from the business, education and voluntary sectors to enable young people, wherever they live and whatever their background, to have access to social action.

#iwill promoted the following model as descriptive of quality within social action:

Figure 1: #iwill youth social action model

The problem with this model is that it exists at a level of distance from the social reality of young people who are living in social conditions that exacerbate social isolation and loneliness. It has been proposed in a context of austerity or rather the reconstruction of a late neoliberal youth sector assemblage (McGimpsey, 2017) that has moved away

from any kind of public service model. The highly temporary forms of commitment to particular projects that accompanies this reconstruction and the strategies that prepared the ground through the quasi-marketisation and commissioning of public services have meant that in most cities, projects which previously existed as the 'last nerve endings of the community' struggle to survive.

The term 'social action' might potentially be heard in the context of a tradition of 'cultural action for freedom' in which a disruptive and unsettling movement within the social nexus occurs during a liberatory pedagogic practice. This shift constitutes a shift in participants' relation to their conditions of life. Rather than seeing conditions of life as natural, unchanging and unable to be influenced by those who must endure poverty, loneliness and exclusion, social and political education in youth work rooted in Freirean thinking saw social action as a praxis that engaged with oppressive reality in order to change it. In other words, 'social action' was understood as political, caught up in a struggle over the power to name and read the world, and as a praxis, in which 'theory' was more than 'blah' and 'action' more than 'unthinking activism' (Freire 1972).

In contemporary discussions of social action, the idea of forming a 'habit for life' is important and is less concerned with disruptive and unsettling change than with sustaining and repairing the bonds of the social which have been neglected. The term 'social action' can easily be substituted by 'volunteering' and the work undertaken by young people is most easily recognised as that strand of engagement in youth work concerned with helping others and improving the quality of life in local neighbourhoods. Litter picking and painting the village hall are common metaphors for such practices as well as actual undertakings. The approach to youth work which such

projects develop owes more to traditions of pedagogy as character formation and as a preparation for life's well established pathways. Unfortunately, the nature of the economic reality is such that these 'well-established pathways' have been destroyed (this is part of what is figured in the bland term 'postindustrial'), and little sense of what might replace them beyond the call centres and distribution warehouses of global megabusiness has emerged.

In this context, youth work cannot but be ameliorative, seeking to replace bonds of connection that austerity politics have systematically destroyed. Ian McGimpsey (2017) has shown in his studies of the reconstruction of the youth sector how the shifts in financing of the sector did not so much reduce spending, which was already limited, as redirect and restructure it, and this is further borne out in the work of Bernard Davies. For example, McGimpsey shows how between 2000/1 and 2007/8, UK Government spending on the voluntary sector grew by more than £5 billion (55%) as the sector was used to scale up public service provision. Following data from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, McGimpsey shows that while contractual purchasing accounted for half of all money spent on the voluntary sector in 2001, by 2008 it was almost three quarters of a larger pie. However, in the period of the Coalition Government and then the subsequent Conservative Government, within the Early Intervention Grant (EIG) and following the withdrawal of national output targets and ring-fenced funding, local quasi-markets of youth services not only suffered but suffered *disproportionately*. The National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society point out that, keeping budgetary definitions as consistent as possible, funding within the EIG was reduced by 24% between 2010–2011 and 2014–2015. However, levels of spending on youth services fell by around 30%, while family services fell by as little as 4%. In 2012, the UK Coalition Government passed the Public Services (Social

Value) Act, and it was from this point that the emphasis on investment and returns developed. One new programme absorbed however a large amount of both funding and political support, as the project of Prime Minister David Cameron; the National Citizen Service (NCS). (The fiasco that this scheme has embodied is dispassionately detailed elsewhere (Davies 2019)).

Sara Mills, who has studied various embodiments of 'youth social action', has argued that the scales of youth citizenship embedded in NCS promote engagement at the local scale, as part of a national collective, while the global scale is curiously absent. She argues secondly that discourses of youth citizenship are increasingly mobilised alongside ideas of Britishness, yet fractured by the geographies of devolution. It is increasingly evident that this is also a fracture line marked by poverty. Mills argues that:

> Crucially, for NCS, this revolves around social action - the implication being that these habits of increased levels of voluntary activity would then continue throughout the lifecourse. This chimes with a number of recent moves in the UK towards the construction and governance of citizens' behaviours and 'nudges' (Jones, Pykett, & Whitehead, 2013). Although there is a universalising of the 'good' citizen here towards certain practices or habits rather than based on social difference or markers of identity, the 'ideal' citizen is still classed and racialized in relation to the target audience of NCS. There were, for example, racialized and classed discourses of community cohesion and 'at risk' youth in the scheme's early framing. Certainly in the branding and marketing of NCS, the ideal citizen is now multi-racial, male or female, with aspirational classed

messages about higher education, CVs and life-skills. The 'social mix' of NCS graduates is primarily middle-class, with the evaluation of the 2014 Summer programme (Ipsos MORI, 2015) having 20% eligible for free school meals, 26% from ethnic minorities, although it still had on average far more female (71%) than male participants.

It is now impossible to argue, in such fractured times, that models of youth work which emphasise voice, rights and empowerment alone can be adequate to the context in which lonely and disempowered young people find themselves. It does, however, remain the case that without a real and sustained attention to the framings created by the power regimes operating in this new 'youth sector', social action programmes may only serve to deepen existing divides.

New framings for informal education are emerging, which build on earlier feminist and radical pedagogies in emphasising the embodied nature of experiential learning, its essentially connective character and its more than human locatedness (Ivinson). Such re-framings also pay strong attention to the affective pre-cognitive and more than cognitive, aesthetic and mobile dimensions of experience and learning. Projects have names such as 'Utopian Seedbanks', 'Rainbow Playground' and 'Feminist Webs.' It is worth considering these as signs of a wider more expansive and potentially international view of social action.

<2> Association as a counter-strategy against loneliness: the potential of clubs

All the youth clubs and projects we engaged with were potentially offering important buffers against loneliness to young people who attended. The following statements by youth workers we engaged with through the research process give a strong sense of the

level of attentiveness youth workers can give to the processes of engaging young people who have become isolated and encouraging them into new forms of association:

> There are some young people who come here to the open youth club who are really shy and one of them has been really badly bullied. I started talking to them as part of the street outreach session and I realised that they wouldn't come to the open drop in if certain other people were there. So I started opening up a bit earlier for them so they can have their own little club session where they can feel safe and build up their confidence. (Youth Worker, Group Discussion)

> Getting across the doorstep and acknowledging that you are looking for support is probably the hardest thing for the young people. There's one young person who comes regularly and says it has taken a year to do it. Once they have done that, the rest is easier. I say to them, there isn't any-one who comes through that door who doesn't need support. (Youth Worker)

> Our first session of the twelve week programme, there is a big welcome breakfast and there are a lot of staff there. Everyone who comes has been visited and texted ahead, sometimes several times, and everyone has a one-to-one relationship with a staff member who sometimes accompanies them to the first session. (Youth Worker)

When there is a good level of resource available, youth work projects and youth clubs can offer various opportunities to do things together. The widest offer we saw was at N-Gage in Ballymena, and we would like to see all young people involved in youth work having these opportunities. The programme in Ballymena included residentials to do adventure activities, but also spa weekends, creative writing courses, music and DJing, Fan Fiction workshops, knitting and crafts as well as the discussion groups 'Discuss with No Fuss' and 'Chill and Spill'. The Hub also offered a relaxing garden space, aromatherapy and acupuncture.

Youth work can be experienced at its most powerful when it is initiated from within a community which works autonomously in the face of oppression, and in search of an education for liberation. We encountered this most strongly in our research in the experience of queer and trans* youth projects and the ways in which they were developing residential experience as the basis for a counterculture of mutual support and affirmation in the face of a wider environment that contains much hostility. 'Rainbow Playground' is an example of a time when young people from LGBTQI+ projects can come together to enjoy themselves and take part in activities together without having to deal with the persistent expectation of a hostile environment. Coming into a youth group that can be seen as a 'safe enough space' and a 'brave enough space' on the basis of a shared experience, label or even perhaps identity, is a well-established practice, drawing on the experience of a range of wider social movements. The process enables those involved to claim a label in order to reject a label, but also to explore its implications and the range of relationships between experience and acceptance, distance, challenge, creation and recreation of namings for that experience. In the context of the experience of a Proud Trust project, one young person talked about how she had negotiated her changing sense of self and her acceptance and affirmation of her experience. She talked about becoming Spikey:

> ‘I was dangerous to myself, if you know what I mean: that’s what stopped places being safe most of all. By being Spikey, Well I’m out there now; they can’t put me down any more; well, they can put me down but its harder for them when I’m stronger and more confident…they can still put me down, they do still put me down; but it’s harder.’ (Anon, Manchester)

This same young person spoke about singing and lip-synching as parts of performance and being out there – something they had always been good at – as a powerful way of being strong.

Practices of welcoming are very much emphasised in queer youth groups, as is acceptance of people’s chosen names and pronouns. There is much discussion of names chosen, accepted and rejected; of names chosen from fiction (vampire names); of names woven together to make a new sense of possibility.

Youth workers characteristically recognise that response makes a difference. People make places welcoming or unwelcoming. One young person told us that after they had been mercilessly teased through high school without teachers doing anything (even though then they were simply presenting as a lesbian not as trans*), they had failed all their exams as a result, but retaken them and eventually got into sixth form college. Then they had simply taken the step of enrolling under a new name and as a boy at the sixth form college, and that the staff there had been brilliant. For this young person, youth workers had made all the difference as they had been supported through their school experience in their youth group for seven years. After this, they had chosen to speak out and support others, even sharing their own sense of struggle and difficulty, as a way of becoming more confident and

making spaces more welcoming, taking part in arts activities such as TransVegas (a trans* arts festival) even whilst being terrified.

It is significant that the practice of youth work in so many queer and trans* youth projects is consistent with a very traditional and well-established set of approaches to open youth work. The earliest explorations of experiential learning emphasised adventure, association and challenge, and these remain at the core of the work of the clubs and spaces we encountered in our research. The creation of 'Rainbow' spaces enables the group and association to be the source of learning and affirmation, starting from strengths rather than pathologies or deficiencies. Paradoxically, this enables consistency of a sense of self and capacities beyond gender and sexuality to be recognised, and this recognition is part of the continuing relationality and conversation that can occur in youth clubs.

One young person who was doing a media course and had a placement with CBeebies explained:

"I always knew that somehow that I could tell children's stories. I did graphics at college and I carried on creating narratives in different media for members of my family and for my youth group. It was something they were good at, whatever else was happening." (Alex, Salford, aged 19)

In the final chapter, we will consider some traditional forms of collective action, including trade unionism and co-operative action. It is the case that some youth work should be considered alongside these as a form of community-based collective action, which builds solidarities and combats loneliness, as well as enabling creativity. It is at its best a sophisticated and complex practice which works best within the time frames of responsiveness and listening and improvisation, rather than of targets and outcomes.

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<1> Chapter 13: Creativity and solidarity as method: the example of 'Missing' and other stories

The partnership between academic research, youth work and creative arts practice was critical to the success of this project. The immersive theatre performance 'Missing' is presented in detail in this chapter, to show how collaboration and creativity were harnessed before, during and after the performances to enable a living response to loneliness and friendship.

'Missing' was an immersive theatre performance that explored the way loneliness emerges in the life of a quite ordinary and academically successful seventeen-year-old girl, 'Jessica'. Jessica is not without friends and has a part-time job with a small income and a social life. Rather than engaging as audience members, participants pieced together the evidence about why Jessica had 'gone missing'. The audience was presented with a range of clues and stimuli, from video footage of her friends to a personal diary and her playlists, and they were invited to explore and interpret the fragments of 'Jessica's' life for signs and experiences that eventually lead to questions of loneliness and connection.

In arriving at this production and its work in generating further conversations about young people and loneliness, the research team were weaving together three significant threads. Firstly, our research context in the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University is one of a research community with a strong interest in the aesthetic, the playful and the sensory, as part of what is termed a new materialist and more-than-human turn in research. Secondly, the context of youth work and informal education provides access to a practice of socio-cultural animation, a framing of work most fully developed in a European context in France, Italy and Spain but also present in the UK.

Thirdly, and overlapping with both of these, there is the context of socially engaged applied theatre in which immersive theatre is currently the predominant form of practice. The Creative Director of The Horsfall Project and part of the 42nd Street creative team, Julie McCarthy, had extensive experience of this. We can identify therefore the research-creation practice which occurred as emerging from and shaped by a number of communities (Springgay & Truman 2018).

In considering and crafting a process that might enable academic researchers and non-specialist researchers who were experts through lived experience to work together in a research project on youth loneliness, an epistemology rooted in recognising situated and unrecognised or frequently discredited knowledges was significant. The research-creation approach flowed from this, in part also because it seemed apparent that engaging with this subject of loneliness directly could be difficult, raising as it does a level of self-protective defensiveness. Rather than taking a confessional or individualist approach to personal experience, the research team was inspired by feminist engagements with phenomenological understanding that developed a range of ways of reading personal experience as knowledge bearing, and as political. In consequence therefore such engagements offer a powerful lens on the social experience of loneliness (Ahmed 2006; Code 1991; Haraway 1988).

Research creation allows an approach to working with personal experience without overburdening either that experience or the people who bear it with public exposure and its freight of potential meanings. Arts-based methods, in a 'new materialist' and 'more than human' frame also have the potential to reach below, above and around particular experiential moments, into the sensory environment of all our thinking-feeling (Ivinson &

Renold 2019), and to enable a deepening of sensory engagements in which both knowledge and its accompanying uncertainty are tangibly co-created (Stewart 2007). There has been powerful recent attention to the auditory dimension of experience in ways which can engage a deeper listening and which can enable noises far off to be heard and sometimes, though not necessarily, to be recognised as meaning bearing (Oliveros 2005; Back 2007).

The second significant thread that fed into 'Missing' was an approach to creativity which emerged from the traditions of youth work as a community-based practice of socio-cultural animation with roots in philosophical enquiry. Loneliness can be seen as a form of solitude that has continued longer than was desired and solitude has often been seen as a source of creativity. As Professor Barbara Taylor has pointed out, solitude can take on many forms, including the poetic, the academic and the religious. For the opening lecture of the Pathologies of Solitude research project, Taylor wrote:

> Solitude can be experienced as a privileged condition for people who are religious but it is also associated with knowledge […] Between the 17th to 19th centuries solitude could be used to refer to leisure, daydreaming and even melancholy. For others it referred to truth. Knowledge seekers would deliberately set themselves apart from others as they undertook solitary study.

The tradition of socio-cultural animation in youth work and community education also directs attention to those streams in practice and those moments which are more than rational or instrumental and values, in ways often termed a Romantic approach to youth work: an approach to practice which can include exploring the experience of solitude, and

also the experience of awe and wonder. Youth work in this account is both more and other than either therapy or upskilling. It is animation.

Animation is concerned with movement and stirring, touching and probing, repetitions and changes of beat, experimentation, and the sonic and phatic presences and absences that underlie speech. It is rooted in attention to breathing life into what has been perceived as dead. This breath is what enables speech but also many other non-verbal expressions. Such animation underlies all the approaches we were tuning in to.

Youth work has been described as a practice that is rehearsed but improvised. The affinity with live performance – either musical or dramatic – is obvious here, but the account of this is rarely developed. Working in a transdisciplinary network – as we were able to do in this research project – undoubtedly enabled the expansion of our thinking about this metaphor and lived practice of both rehearsal and improvisation. There is a clear posited connection between the disciplines of rehearsal that are necessarily repeated many times, as a musical score is practiced until it can be played, and improvisation, which is new and draws on a moment of gift in creativity.

Informal (or non-formal) education, to give youth work one of its names, involves both conscious effort and non-effort, a shaping process and a following of hunches and intuitions, a going with the flow. This turning point, when effort ceases and non-effort begins, is the very moment when creativity happens (Milner 1937). The production of 'Missing' was disciplined, crafted, prepared meticulously, active and skilled. But it also involved moments that were new and emergent and cried out to be recognised each time it was performed, including things that were stumbled over in the process.

The third context for engaging with the theme of creativity in our project involved the practice of socially engaged applied theatre, with roots in Augusto Boal's (1970) engagement with Paolo Freire, in Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre. Applied theatre has recently moved into an engagement with immersive theatre. In doing so, it responds to the change of conditions of contemporary living in which reality TV, live tweeting and constant virtual engagement might be said to create both a taste for rapid movement into a performance and a thirst for direct and potentially intimate experience. By abolishing 'the fourth wall' and avoiding the civic spaces designated as theatres, it is possible to move the theatrical experience and make it more accessible to a wider range of audiences. This happened in 'Missing' with the tour to a number of youth centres that we discussed earlier. Young people whose spaces we entered became 'trainee officers' in a missing persons scenario, which it was the task of their teams to solve. As previously discussed, they did through responding to the staged introduction of clues concerning the life of Jessica.

Jana Wendler and Tricia Coleman, the designers of 'Missing', were drawing on their expertise in designing experimental games spaces and theatre production. They both participated in research workshops and designed a session for re-engagement with the research data in the process of creating 'Missing'. As a result, there was no precise distinction between the processes of the research and the processes of making the performance, although different teams were clearly bringing specific expertise to bear. As we have noted, solitude is well-established by thinkers associated with the broad stream of psychoanalytic thought (particularly those associated with Jung and Winnicott, such as Anthony Storr and Marian Milner) as a critical basis for creativity. From these perspectives therefore, the intermingling of a research project that might unsettle received ideas about

loneliness with a body of applied theatre practice (a creative but definitionally not solitary practice) was important.

Undertaking study other than in a solitary way, as we did in this collaborative research , might enabled us to question further 'who are we with when we are thinking?' and to experience a solidaristic aspect of creativity and hence even to loneliness. Who we were with was no longer the inner world of experience alone but also the practical team who made and toured the show. The driver and route finder and props manager and actor were co-thinkers about loneliness too. In the following account of the creation of 'Missing', we highlight some of the methods used for this developing thinking/feeling together.

The Method of 'Missing'

The story of Jessica emerged after a number of early experiments, including the idea of a redesigned card game, based on the game 'Donkey' or 'Old Maid' in which we all do everything possible not to be left with the 'odd' card at the end of the game. Playing versions of this game to explore the feelings of isolation and competition, of targeting or avoiding one another on the basis of randomly assigned characteristics, gave the research team some direct access to feelings which contribute to the painfulness of loneliness and isolation.

In the next stage of development, the research team worked with a research method first used by the socialist feminist scholar and activist Frigga Haug, which has recently been re-engaged with by new materialist scholars (Haug 1992; Gonick & Gannon 2014). It involves the retelling of narratives related to loneliness that had been gathered and shared in the earliest stages of the project. Haug's method of 'Memory Work' involves retelling and rewriting experiences in the third person. It enables simultaneously a deepening of

engagement with experience and a loosening of connection between the words and the particular authors of them. It is a very precise way of making evident how the personal is both social and political. In the process, loneliness becomes something that, as well as being intensely private, can somehow be shared. It was in this process that that the idea that 'loneliness connects us' developed further as a theme for the project. During the sessions that worked with this method, a straight young woman retold a queer narrative and a group of UK based Manchester students retold the story first told by a refugee. In doing so, the recognition of shared experience was made tangible both to those who might have originated stories and those who retold them.

Telling stories that originated elsewhere deepens a sense of solidarity, and listening to others retell stories that may have had an original link with one's own lifeworld extends and deepens recognition of the normality and prevalence of loneliness across a spectrum of experiences. This was the process from which the 'normal' character of Jessica, the girl in the play who has gone 'Missing', emerged.

The story-boarding and creation of the engine of the plot of the play (the detective enquiring into a mystery is a classic metaphor for scientific research enquiry) was then undertaken by Jana Wendler and Trish Coleman, the specialists. This involved recognising the key aspects of transition for a young person that might provoke loneliness: the exam grades, the family pressure, the lack of money, the girlfriend/boyfriend issues, and more. The ways in which the necessary information flowed into the immersive experience of the missing person's investigation was skilfully crafted in order to bring the missing person's inquiry to a satisfactory conclusion when it was undertaken by, say, three teams of five, and within half an hour of concentrated action.

The next stage of development was the pre-tour testing of the performance with the young members of the research team; this led to significant changes to props and clues to make them more recognisable to people Jessica's age, including details of the letter about college attendance and about the kinds of energy drinks she might have in her backpack. It was also in this stage of the creation of Jessica's story that the significance of her relationships beyond her immediate family, for example with aunts and uncles and grandparents, emerged. The script for the lead actor was written and amended, and this part was developed by Jane Whittaker, an actor specially recruited by the creative team because of their experience of previous collaborations. 'Missing' was then ready to tour, accompanied by three members of the research team.

In preparing for the tour, the process of engagement was supported by youth workers at 42nd Street and then by youth workers in the projects we visited, which were presented briefly in Chapter 12. The preparation included sending out both information about the play (the kinds of rooms needed and the length of time it took; the number of participants we could accommodate) and information about the research, with a suggestion concerning some of the complex issues that the play might provoke for young people. And, indeed, in each of the sites in which 'Missing' was performed, there was searching and intimate conversation, both before and after the performance, which moved rapidly into a discussion of difficult and painful subjects, including that of attempted suicide. The 'immersiveness' of the experience had its anticipated effects of rapidly opening up the conversation and the mutual exploration of a potentially difficult subject.

Space was a significant feature of this process, as the transformation of the everyday spaces of youth clubs and projects into missing persons investigation rooms was immediately

powerful, accompanied as it was by the actor playing the Police Commanding Office issuing a direct set of instructions as the participants/audience entered the space. The youth club space, constructed out of the buildings often designed by architects for quite other purposes in any case, became temporarily deconstructed as a new space of theatrical performance emerged. It was abstracted by the creative designers of 'Missing', reconstructed by the performers and then by the performers with the young participants.

The immersive sensual experiences then included hands-on opening and closing of envelopes and exploration of materials found, evoked by family snapshots, a can of energy drink, a wage slip with deductions, a cuddly toy. The design of the piece fully engaged participants in a new world, and what had happened to Jessica, the girl who has gone 'Missing', and why, became an urgent issue.

After each performance, there was a conversation with participants, which, in every case, added to and deepened the findings concerning young people's accounts of the experience of loneliness. At the same time, it confirmed the potential of the more than rational as a source of knowing, stimulated by and also embedded in arts practice, in this case, theatre as a mode of enquiry. In the conversation, we passed round the props and invited participants to say something about them, carrying the affective intensity of the play into the post-performance discussion.

Collaborative research in applied theatre has recently very helpfully been discussed as a form of polyphony (Mackey 2016) Across the visual arts, ideas of 'socially engaged practice' emerged based in the ideas of Bourriaud (2002), with the recognition that moments of sociality or what are termed 'micro-utopias' might occur in ways that translate meaningfully outside the performance spaces. The experience of taking part in 'Missing' had aspects of

‘micro-utopia’: a question remains as to what extent this has had impact beyond the performance spaces. Because theatre is inherently social, this relationality as a source of practicing and imagining otherwise is readily understood and experienced and could have been all the more powerful and micro-utopian as a response to the theme of separation and lack of relationality which is loneliness.

The discussion of practice research in applied theatre has therefore swiftly moved away from an autoethnographic focus on the performer or performance towards a focus on other people, and more generally to accept a broader and more explicitly social and political research enquiry: the example in our case of the focus on ‘loneliness’. It is also self-evidently the case in applied theatre that research processes are shared with many voices and this leads to questioning about taken for granted authority and authorship, usually vested in universities.

One of the consequences of so multiple and various an input into a research project is that there are multiple and unarticulated negotiations of power and hierarchies of knowledge. This is the reason that the metaphor of polyphony is so productive. As Sally Mackey (2016) has written:

> Polyphony suggests a number of different voices participating in the overall project, frequently following their own routes and independent needs, sometimes harmonious and occasionally not. Within this polyphony are moments of homophony, where all voices join together into one clear and combined melodic line. There are also moments of monophony, where singular voices can be heard quite distinctly, as is the case so often in conversations. A conversation has a topic, a

focus, matter. In utilising this metaphor, immediately the subject matter of the research is centrally positioned, therefore, the 'conversation' is about the research focus.

And it was indeed the case that after the performances of 'Missing', the research focus of loneliness became the shaping focus of the conversation. Nevertheless, in each of the performance spaces, both the intensity of the immersive experience and the singularity of the place where the performance occurred brought clear new insights into the continuing conversation. Themes of coastal towns and their complex problems emerged in Rhyl; as well as this, the issue of poverty and the impact of austerity policies emerged in Great Yarmouth; in Ballymena the focus on the experience of 'being different' emerged, as did the issue of what is hidden, through the attention paid to 'hidden harm'; in Glasgow, the theme of attempted suicide (which emerged everywhere) came powerfully to the fore alongside and balanced by a strong affirmation of the importance of friendship. In each place too, individual young people spoke at length and in monophonies of incredible and affecting beauty.

In these ways, creative practices have played a central role in the research reported on in this book, and in the process they have also emerged as important sources of support in young people's responses to loneliness. We have discussed the performance of 'Missing' in some detail and depth in order to illuminate the relational approach to aesthetics and the potential of creativity to combat loneliness both through solitude and through association and solidarity. In chapters throughout this book, contributions made by young people in response to the performance of 'Missing' can be found.

There is however also other evidence in our study for the claim that creativity is a method of responding to loneliness. In particular, we found numerous examples of young people's capacities to develop ways of connecting through creating momentary shared projects, many of which, though not all, were creative.

<2> Something to do together and alone: the importance of shared interests and creativity

Bike repairs; making YouTube films; volunteering in the Oxfam shop; playing in a South Korean football team and winning the 'best foreign player' medal even though you're English; spa visits; dancing; making a radio programme; going fishing and joining an angling club; playing the ukulele in a ukulele band; training and partnering one another in keeping fit and healthy. Some of these we did together as a group of co-researchers and some we heard of others doing. Not all of these are artistic activities, but the element of play that is integral to creativity is a significant aspect of all of them.

Play is something intrinsically self-initiated and not directed towards compliance with others; it is attunement to interest, curiosity and enjoyment. The ability to play is seen as the grounding through which we work through the anxieties and complexities involved in our being both separate from and connected to others, from our early childhood separation from our (m)other onwards. It may be through play that we learn first the capacity to be both alone with ourselves and in the company of others, without feeling overwhelmed or abandoned.

Listening to music was comforting in lonely times; sometimes listening in to the sadness and loneliness of others – spoken and not spoken – helped in knowing that you are not alone. Music flows into the cracks where other things cannot go. Making music can be another

shared interest. And for several young people we encountered, it was writing poetry, often inspired by song lyrics, that had given them a way to cope with their loneliness:

> 'You may get to a boundary where the loneliness is beginning to affect your health and then a persistent negative train of thought is setting in. I have used a website where I wrote and posted my own poems as a way of looking after myself. Creativity and poetry is a way to let out feelings; you can interact with the page even when you can't interact with people.' (Sumaiya, aged 23, Manchester)

But, while recognising the importance of art and creativity, other co-researchers expressed a caution:

"You could be a genius as an artist or a poet and still need help and reassurance in the everyday. A big difference between loneliness and solitude is being able to be creative and work in the everyday" (Rebecca, aged 19, Manchester).

For some young people, such activities offered a temporary and vital distraction from a preoccupation with painful experience and from a persistent loneliness. And for some, the need for distraction also developed into forms of escapism. Play is significant for development, and in the face of various feelings of vulnerability, anxiety and helplessness, young people enjoy the stories of Harry Potter and identify with a variety of superheroes. Fantasy, including fantasy games of many kinds, provide ways of handling trauma (as discussed in Chapter 8), and finding ways of negotiating feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Young people also mentioned ways of escaping into another world,

including the world of religion, as a way of avoiding loneliness: “Religion and prayer and ritual can have a calming influence” (Gil, aged 23, Manchester).

It is controversial to reduce the role of religion to mere escapism and illusion. However seeing the need for ‘the opium of the people, the heart of a heartless world’ being expressed in religion is a well-established understanding of the worldly consolations that religion can provide. These include an identity and an opportunity to belong. Religious belief and the following of the Prophet (pbuh), God or Enlightened One can undoubtedly stand in a more substantial way as giving access to a superpower, similar to the way fantasy operates. As Alice Walker indicated in her novel *The Colour Purple*, the need for this kind of faith may diminish once personal needs for power and security are met in other more mundane ways.

At the same time, it can be said that contemplative prayer and meditation practices offer access to a sense of the divine presence, a ground of being and becoming that underpins all things and is utterly unconditional. Such access can provide a way of admitting, acknowledging and facing difficulty rather than avoiding it, as is perhaps too easily assumed to be the escapist function of religion. When the divine is experienced as a source of enhancing rather than avoiding life, it is less likely that such practice is abandoned when life circumstances change.

<2> Creativity, solitude and solidarity

The connections between creativity and solitude and between solitude and solidarity are being obscured in the current social and moral panic about loneliness. If, as Barbara Taylor has argued, loneliness is a pathology of solitude, it is important to value experiences of solitude and stillness and offer opportunities to practice them and find their connectedness

with experiences of solidarity and collaboration as a part of childhood and adolescence. It is very important that we do not regard young people choosing to spend time alone as inherently pathological, and young people and adults need to be given every opportunity to explore the positive experience of solitude. Paradoxically, such opportunities are rare, even in a society in which it is claimed that loneliness is on the increase.

One place where it may be found is in the linking of creativity with the capacity for dreams and meditation and what is sometimes called 'spirituality', as well as in traditional religious practices associated with monasticism. It is also interesting that some libraries in cities, with their traditions of offering spaces for silence, are becoming important 'youth' spaces, and also places where many outsiders of various tribes are finding a home.

Since the capacity for solitude can be strongly and positively linked to creativity, there are also strong associations between the capacity for solitude and the capacity for solidarity. In monastic traditions of both Buddhism and Christianity, this is related to the development of the capacity for compassion. Creativity, solidarity and friendship can emerge from such compassion, making the possibility of meaningful connection stronger, and the need for forms of connection which intensify loneliness less urgent. In order to enable young people to continue to develop their resources to respond to loneliness, we need to offer more positive experiences of both connection and solitude. Practices of creativity mediate this movement into both a calming solitude and a practice of compassionate solidarity and co-operation. Turning to the natural world as a resource – walking in parks, going fishing, swimming in the sea – as well as the companionship of other animals, especially dogs, cats and horses, needs to be recognised as an aspect of this turn to calmness and compassion, which seems intrinsically linked to creativity.

<2> Friendship and solidarity

There were examples in every location of young people reaching out beyond their own immediate context to offer wider forms of connection. We found this in creative practice but also in the workplace as well as in less traditional forms. At the end of one of the creative sessions in the second phase of the project, we became aware that the new company, Deliveroo, had a base very close to the place where we were developing the work, and the continual sight of young people working as Deliveroo drivers brought further questions into the consciousness of the project.

At first, the Manchester Metropolitan University research team saw the gig economy Deliveroo driver as the epitome of a lonely and isolating society: a young man or, less frequently, a woman, cycling alone through dark winter nights to deliver take away food to people living alone in flats. This stereotype proved too one-dimensional, but it opened up interesting discussions on changing experiences of work and how it creates opportunities and structures for socialisation, belonging and friendship. One young person described their experience working for Deliveroo:

> 'I am working because I dropped out of sixth-form college last year. I was on completely the wrong course. I will go back to college to do A-Levels but not for six months. I saw 'Taxidriver', the spoof film with Queen Latifah, and I thought it looked fun to be a delivery driver. I applied to Deliveroo online. The job application was on Facebook. Had an hour's training, which was a kind of interview. After that I was given the app, and allocated a zone, and my uniform and box. There was a deposit of £150 for the box which is deducted a certain amount per drop from earnings. The

> rate of pay is £6.50 an hour plus 50p per drop. 12 hours and 23 drops earns me £100. I usually work Friday night, Saturday night and Sunday night with main customers in new city centre blocks of flats in Timber Wharf and the Green Quarter. I've learned new ways around the city: new paths. There's solidarity among Deliveroo drivers, acknowledging each other and helping out if someone gets a puncture. The money was good in the run up to Christmas but then has been poor since. I won't do it much longer. It has soon stopped being fun.' (Joe, aged 17, Manchester)

During the period in which we were working on this research, there was significant publicity about trade union organising in the gig economy and the role that young workers were taking in this new unionism. This also emerged in the research:

> 'I joined the Union this week. My nan is really proud of me. We were on Zero Hours and no Contracts, no money except when they wanted you to work twelve hour shifts and we were being kept off the car park area at Tesco's by Security Guards when we weren't working.' (John, aged 18, Norwich)

Older forms of mutuality and solidarity, which seemed to have lost traction in the globalised economy, were being turned to again and meeting with some success. One of the creative workshops that we facilitated during the research project involved a session at the People's History Museum, where we explored the archive of youth charters and youth activism in the trade union movement. Not all forms of collective creativity and advocacy take the form of

trade unionism however. Similarly, there was a recognition that advocacy on one's own behalf and on behalf of others might be a means of countering loneliness: "I went to the House of Commons on behalf of 42nd Street and I spoke about our research on youth loneliness and how this links to mental health issues people face and how many more places like 42nd Street there need to be" (Clayton, aged 21, Manchester). These forms of collectively advocacy, classically associated with practices of voice and empowerment in youth work, are now most often supported through artistic projects which bring creation to voice. In doing so, they provide a platform to both support existing practices and organisations and to begin to create new ways of being and doing that can subvert the sense of loneliness and create new processes of connection.

Young people articulated the possibilities of friendship and mutual support across a wide spectrum of practices of association in our research. In so doing they have pointed the ways to important counter-practices and occasional micro-utopias in the context of the social conditions of loneliness.

<1> Chapter 14 - New ways for thinking and feeling loneliness

Loneliness Connects Us is the first significant UK study of youth loneliness with and from the perspective of young people. The approach developed through youth work research and practice methodologies, characterised by activity, association,(learning together by doing), and challenge. We hosted weekly engagements with a core group of youth co-researchers to initiate a dialogue that expanded and intensified through a carousel of moving methods. We talked to and debated with one another. We talked as we made things. We listened to music together. We accompanied one another to social occasions such as the theatre and restaurants. As the research progressed the conversations amongst the youth co-research group were translated into an immersive theatre performance that toured the UK to grow and contextualise the dialogue. We developed legacy activities that included staging a youth summit, an online arts resource, and mobilising the project findings through the mainstream media and with policy makers. In total we engaged over 200 young people and had conversations with numerous professionals. It is the breadth and plurality of the study's engagement with young people and youth loneliness that justifies the claim for the research's significance, and made it such a privilege to undertake.

This concluding chapter returns to the youth co-researchers' agenda to reflect on the findings and to explore implications for the youth loneliness research and policy agenda. We argue for reversing the individualisation of loneliness in research and practice in order to think in more expansive ways about youth loneliness and belonging. This begins from a necessary engagement with difference within the social and with the social conditions of loneliness including poverty, precarity and inequality. Building on the youth work inspired creative co-produced methods, we propose ways to re-found the youth loneliness agenda, specifically in committing to radical democratic practice. The chapter concludes with the recommendations (which were made at the end of the research project by the team) of things we can all do to help reduce youth loneliness

<2> Loneliness beyond the individual

We identified a problematic cluster of ways in which loneliness is conceptualised and communicated: as contagious, a crisis, and individualising. The emotional contagion thesis is a leading explanation of the spread and emergence of loneliness (Cacioppo 2009; Cacioppo, Fowler & Christakis 2010). In addition, loneliness is described as an epidemic by academics, journalists and politicians (Murthy 2016; Holt-Lunstad 2017; Easton 2018; Howe 2019). We do not argue that emotions or affective states are not shared and shareable. There are studies that evidence the communicability of positive and negative affect across time on online platforms (Kramer, Guillory and Hancock 2014). If the Facebook algorithm serves up more negative content you are likely to share more negative content. And we should not be surprised at this. By some accounts, the capacity to affect and be affected is essential to what is means to be human (Massumi 2015).

It is problematic however to think of loneliness as an epidemic in individualising ways within the prevailing conditions of neoliberalism. The individualisation of loneliness is evident in prominent definitions of loneliness within psychology (Peplau & Perlman 1982; de Jong-Gerveld 1987). Such orientations emerging from psychology studies readily translate into advice for individual lonely young people on how to they as individuals can navigate loneliness, as in the advice emerging from the BBC Loneliness Experiment. Such advice can all too easily be taken up in and frame neoliberalising governmentality strategies that work to responsibilise young people for resolving the challenges they might encounter in life through resilience, grit and character (Burman 2018; Allen & Bull 2018).

In challenging the individualisation of loneliness, it is nonetheless important to recognise that the young people we engaged with understood loneliness as a personal and individual experience. For example, in the quotes below loneliness is described in terms of feelings of disconnection from oneself or a situation and in terms of the physical and psychological effects of loneliness,

"Loneliness... it's when you don't feel connected. You're there, but you're not really there in your head." (Christine, 19 years old, Manchester)

"It can really hurt. It has so much effect on your body as well. It can make you really, really not trust anyone." (Luke, 17, Great Yarmouth)

Thinking of lonely individuals and of inter-personal responses to it are very accessible ways of thinking about loneliness. Thus loneliness is presented as the negative experience of individuals without sufficient quality or quantity of social connection, which can be remedied by additional individuals. However, through the research we observed changing and nuanced relationships of friendship and obligations of care and support that escaped this neat account. Although not impossible we found these ideas harder to describe and make legible in comparison to more familiar commitments relating to individual responsibility and resourcefulness. The following example is offered as one among many examples of such relationality we heard of.

One of our co-researchers – Patience – provided an explanation of loneliness that became significant in the research findings,

Loneliness means something different to everyone because everyone experiences things differently. But I don't think people should be afraid of loneliness. All your emotions are important... if you're lonely it means it you're missing out on something, you need that social connection. (Patience, 20 years old)

Patience was often wise and articulate in describing youth loneliness. Documenting and amplifying her statements was a constructive act for this youth participatory research. This quote was one that resonated with a range of different audiences as we communicated the research findings. The research funder, for example, named one of their reports on loneliness, 'All our emotions are important' (Co-op Foundation 2018). It is important, however, to acknowledge that this was one insight from one young woman and that there were different perspectives within the co-research

team. We, as academics, had selected it for inclusion in the project report and in turn found it interesting to consider why Patience's message received such a ready audience.

The tone suggests the self-help genre: a wise voice demystifying the world for an uninformed *other*. The location of the response is seemingly with the lonely young person to appreciate that their feelings of loneliness mean *they* should take action and re-connect with people. If lonely people must take action then we need to ask what the implications are for the rest of us who at this particular point in time are not lonely individuals?

It might seem unfair to pick apart Patience's quote or the positive response in this way. The point here however is that her words that became so prominent in the initial communication of the research findings do not convey her multiple and profound contributions to the project. For example, Patience had a close relationship with one of the other youth co-researchers, Mark. He attended the project to help deal with mental health issues and feelings of loneliness as did (in some form, articulated or not) all who became involved with the research including the youth workers and academic researchers. We know that loneliness can be experienced as a form of social pain (Cacioppo et al. 2011) and be accompanied by anxiety and hyper-vigilance in the exaggerated perceptions of threat through social interactions (Qualter et al. 2013). A lonely young person may therefore be anxious, awkward and resist or misinterpret offers of social connection and friendship. At various times throughout the project Mark was challenging, difficult and angry yet Patience always seemed to support him. In turn Patience attended the project for her own reasons, only rarely shared, and Mark accepted her company over many weeks and encouraged her advocacy work which she frequently undertook on behalf of 42nd Street. Out of role as an advocate, Patience was often very quiet and diffident. Patience's words used in the initial project report powerfully communicate the need for lonely young people to take action to connect with others to reduce their loneliness. But beyond this she offered alongside others an expansive practice of care which became a conscious politics as she took up the role of advocate for young people suffering mental health

difficulties, a role that requires a more complex and powerful set of commitments. And Mark made all of us laugh. This relationship of often uneven mutuality seemed to in practice move far beyond 'If you are lonely you have to connect' to a recognition of what is involved when people are there for one another for a while. This continuous support happened even when any one of us at any given moment became anxious and defensive and appeared difficult.

We witnessed and sometimes participated in these changing relationships of care and obligation in many aspects of the research, both with Patience and indeed with Mark in his qualms about posting social media content that might pressure others to drink excessively. The difficulty in describing these relationships and obligations beyond the individual certainly arises from a long established shift to isolate and reduce social relations to the terms of the sovereign individual. The Invisible Committee (2015) teach us that,

"Friend" and "free" in English … come from the same Indo-European root, which conveys the idea of a shared power that grows. Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I am free because I have ties, because I am linked to a reality greater than me." (2015, 127)

Where once to be free was to be with ones friends, freedom is now typically understood as defining the rights and autonomies of the liberal individual (bergman and Montgomery 2017). The most powerful aspects of this research have been those that point to ways to repair these languages and capacities of relationality. In so doing we can create new potentials for convivial communities, while maintaining a deep concern for difference. As the work continues we see a role for engaging with loneliness through theories and methodologies that work to think beyond the individual-collective (Read, 2017). In thinking about social connection we need to think about collectivity. To do this we learn from the ideas of transindividuality (Balibar, 1997; Read, 2017; Spinoza, 1996), and the ways in which reason and affect form two dynamics of sociability and social bonds, and thus the foundations of collective life. We can learn from approaches that illuminate the importance of infrastructures of care, trust and support in maintaining lives worth living (Berlant 2016).

In the next section we return to the youth co-researchers' agenda and explore what we learned through the *Loneliness Connects Us* research and the implications for youth loneliness research and practice.

<2> The *Loneliness Connects Us* youth co-researcher agenda

The first phase of the project culminated with the co-researchers coming together to reflect and articulate a research agenda. As presented in Chapter Three, the agenda was intended to inform both the *Loneliness Connects Us* research and the wider field. Here we highlight the key research findings we have presented in this book in relation to social conditions and experiencing difference, re-imagining connection, and youth work and moving methods. We conclude by a discussion of the ways in which this book contributes to the renewal of radical democratic approaches to community and education.

<3> The social conditions of loneliness: Experiencing difference.

One key aspect of life now routinely shamed is the experience of poverty. The importance of poverty as a vector of loneliness became increasingly evident in the inquiry. The research identified the profound ways in which austerity and poverty, precarity and inequality were exacerbated by and entangled in feelings of loneliness, shame and disconnection. The evidence of this has been presented in the first section of the book. We witnessed this individually in a boy who did not feel he could socialise with his peer group because his mother could not afford the brand trainers he felt were the dress code or standard of entry for friendship. We visited a youth club so underfunded the youth worker did not know if it would be open, if he had paid work, from week to week. An activity for the group was catching the bus out of town and walking home. Of course, it is not that children with more privileged or affluent backgrounds do not experience loneliness or isolation. Yet less privileged young people are more vulnerable to the closure of youth work services, parks, and other beyond school opportunities as a feature of austerity politics with its destruction of convivial publics and social abundance (Fisher 2018) as well as to the processes of cultural governance associated

with neoliberalism, which functions through the social abjection of particular 'out' groups based on systems of classification mobilised through f social power (Tyler 2013, 2020).

Difference within the social was a core concern throughout the research. The co-researchers sought to better understand the changes accompanying 'being 13' and the anxieties and awkwardness when one is no longer a child and yet to become an adult. Youth is a time of multiple *firsts* – the first relationship breakdown or the first time away from home. Without the experience and confidence of having previously overcome adversity, a young person is especially vulnerable to isolation and loneliness. For many young people the transience and mobilities of modern life mean they encounter numerous *firsts*, whether the transitions between stages of schooling or moving from the family home to study or get work. Each move can mean the weakening of ties and the challenges of making new connections. And exploring difference meant not only in the shared newness of loneliness in youth but also the loneliness arising from normative and stigmatizing response to forms of difference in sexuality and gender identity in LGBTQI+ communities.

We turned to insights from feminist and queer theory to think loneliness in relation to normativity and difference. Our research followed feminist and activist practices for deep listening and attuning to one another across and in the affirmation of difference (Lorde 1984; Montgomery & bergman 2017). Audre Lorde, in particular, inspires us to perceive human difference as resources for creative change. Her writings allow for the interruption of the reproduction of shame through joyful encounters that affirm the lives that are seemingly different, weird and odd. The second section of the book has presented our evidence here.

Taken together these were forceful reasons to think beyond the individualisation of loneliness, and take seriously the social conditions of youth loneliness.

<3> Re-imagining connection

We identified approaches for understanding what factors are necessary for defining loneliness and also in helping prevent or navigate unwanted loneliness. The evidence for this has been presented in the third section of the book.

Being known and accepted for who you are represents a powerful sense of connection, yet one in which young people whose lives are defined by normative responses to difference might face barriers to realise. Equally those caught up unquestioningly with normative youth transitions find themselves surprised that they do not thereby escape loneliness. Maintaining genuine or authentic connections might be difficult for any young person if they have to move friendship group, school or place of residence. We cannot wish away the fragmentation and acceleration of young people's lives. Many of the young people we met during the research felt defined by their academic grades, were focused on investing career success over taking time to make friends, or felt compelled to promote an image of themselves through social media as living a life of conspicuous consumption. We need to think carefully and compassionately about the ways we can develop more expansive ways of relating to one another.

A further set of findings related to online spaces, building connections and the politicisation of loneliness. We aimed to question and contextualise the apparent causal relationships between social media, loneliness and isolation as communicated in mainstream media. Instead, we found that young people recognise the potentials of the Internet beyond social media. Yet there was an acknowledgement of the powerful and pervasive pressures that social media technologies impose on young people. Amongst the abundance of online connections, the youth co-researchers were interested in how young people can ask for or offer support and friendship, especially considering the anxieties and awkwardness engendered by loneliness.

Finally re-imagining connection goes hand in hand with seeing youth loneliness as a political issue. We believe that responding to youth loneliness requires developing new forms of solidarity,

belonging and friendship but see also the limitations of some forms of media campaigning. It is in the acknowledgement of the politics of loneliness and the politicisation of youth loneliness that we can re-imagine new ways of young people relating to one another. There is evidence that the burden of the global financial crises from 2008 onwards disproportionately affected young people and further constrained a generation's prospects, and thus politicising and pushing young people to the political left (Milburn 2019). Whether it was the Deliveroo cyclist questioning precarious employment or the young man that joined a union, some of the young people we encountered were asking political questions about the problems they faced and the causes of those problems. We recognise that some young people are committed to taking political action but we argue too that we need to invest in models that support young people access the skills and capacities to take political action around loneliness as one significant painful and damaging aspect of current social relations

<3> Youth Work Practices and Moving Methods

A final powerful finding from the research was the productivity of exploring youth loneliness through diverse and plural methods, grounded in youth work practice. The approach developed out of some fairly practical concerns. The funder wanted the research – the focus and the methods – to be defined by the group of youth co-researchers once it was formed. So we began the project without any definite commitments to specific methods, except that this would be a participatory or co-produced inquiry. It soon became clear that a singular research method, for example a participatory photovoice project for all young people, or approach for data analysis would foreclose young people's diverse experiences of loneliness and limit the forms of engagement for the whole research team.

As presented in chapters 2 and 13, together with the youth co-researchers we staged a series of collective and iterative encounters with loneliness in relation to different media such as film, song, fiction and sites and stages of youth. One of the youth co-researchers reflected on her participation in the project,

"I'm not sure I can say what loneliness is… define it... but ... but I didn't realise before [participating in the research] that it connects to so many different things, you can find it everywhere, in films, in music, talking to friends." (Christine, 19 years old, Manchester)

It was in exploring these connections with young people that we were able to move beyond an initial impasse with young people where they would deny they ever were lonely or suggested individualising responses such as, 'if I was lonely I'd just talk to someone.' Making montages with magazine and newspaper articles, and developing scenarios of, for example, using social media, foregrounded the pressures young people face to be connected. We discussed research findings and statistics. We reflected on our personal experiences and we told and re-told these through narratives in the third person (Haug 1992). This continual process of telling and re-telling, unfixing and re-fixing, interpreting and re-articulating enabled us to move beyond understanding loneliness as a personal and individual failing.

There were therefore numerous lines of inquiry within *Loneliness Connects Us.* In our encounters with young people we heard experiences and thoughts of how something apparently universal – loneliness – was so richly textured in diverse lives. Whether with a gay child living in a socially conservative community or with someone who might be considered 'normal', we started where the young people were and built a dialogue from there. These moments grew through a radical openness in the approach of the research team, a refusal to know in advance what meanings to assign to difference and a continuous commitment to dialogue and uncertainty. We attuned to these encounters by drawing on diverse intellectual resources from cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, youth studies, feminism, theatre and performance. In addition, we engaged with multiple methodologies for developing research from interviews and community philosophy to using immersive theatre and eventful co-production. This polyphonic approach, within the framing created by the original research agendas, is a significant strength of this research project.

Nonetheless, there are troubling aspects concerning the productive potentials of youth work practices and spaces, and of arts and creativity in enabling young people to safely encounter and navigate feelings of loneliness. Under the austerity programme in the UK, the expenditure on social work provision has been severely cut. Youth services have suffered a 73% reduction in funding by £1billion since 2010, with 14,500 youth and community workers cut since 2008, and 750 youth centres closed since 2012 (Labour 2019). Arts and creative activities performed an important role in *Loneliness Connects Us*, and are a very significant and welcome presence in wider responses to the youth loneliness agenda. One established critique of the risks of youth engagement with arts as a form of therapy sees such practice as functioning to relieve and ameliorate anxiety or mental health issues or mask structural inequalities (O'Brien & Donelan 2008; Haiven 2018). Various arts practices are well understood as an effective part of helping young people navigate periods of mental ill health (Fancourt & Finn 2019). Yet when the engagement is individual, apolitical and conditional on being unwell it may be seen only as enabling young people to endure intolerable situations. It is a great tragedy that for most young people access to arts and creative activities in the UK has been severely constrained. In part this is due to a lack of funding for the arts in mainstream schooling and also the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on *academic* subjects such as maths and English.

There is therefore a danger that art practice and cultural pursuits are co-opted as a form of neoliberal self-care (Michaeli 2017). Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) question shifts towards the therapy-culture, well-being agenda and positive psychology which focus on issues such as self-esteem, confidence and motivation. Whether art and culture or yoga and meditation these practices are commodified as packages, 'apps' or programmes and delivered in schools and workplaces as ways of ameliorating the stresses and anxieties of living in the competitive and precarious conditions of late capitalism (Davies 2015; Purser 2019). Sara Amsler (2011) writes of the need to resist these seemingly well-intentioned discourses and practices of therapeutic education and instead to develop,

"the actual forms of affective labour which may condition the radical intellectual transformations that transform a 'happy consciousness' into a critical one and that can help to reconstitute learned fatalism into a desire for agency" (Amsler 2011, p.59)

Rather than only attempting to remove negative experiences from young people's lives, in this case feelings of loneliness, we may need to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016, 167). An instructive place to start is to ask what youth loneliness provokes us to change or do differently. Psychology understands loneliness as an adaptive drive, a social pain or evolutionary drive that reminds us to increase the quality or quantity of our social connection (Cacioppo 2009). Scaling this evolutionary drive to a societal level, we might wonder what this signal is reminding or asking of us to do?

The next two sections explore the implications of the research for the development of the youth loneliness policy and research agendas.

<2> Re-engaging with the loneliness agenda

The *Loneliness Connects Us* research was commissioned to work with young people to understand loneliness and create knowledge that provides practical support for young people and those working with and for them to navigate experiences of loneliness. That we are not short of youth research, recommendations, manifestos and ideas for responding to various youth social issues that nevertheless persist should give us pause for thought. We are used to witnessing: the identification of youth issues and the calls for more funding for innovation and research, better approaches to measurement, the identification of 'what works', the creation of new policies and strategies, the appointment of ministers or policy 'Tsars', and issuing guidance for practitioners. The youth loneliness agenda has broadly developed within this neoliberalising common sense, and so we might wonder why these strategies will be effective in this case.

The significance of the social conditions of loneliness raises a series of challenges for how loneliness interventions are currently conceived. It is important to recognise that there has been significant investment in loneliness projects and we are waiting to fully appreciate the ingenuity and craft in

their design and implementation as this evidence remains within the projects. Nevertheless, the evidence-base for loneliness interventions is recognised as being under-developed (Victor 2019). In addition, there is a critique of the thin sociality of such interventions, where lonely individuals are signposted or socially prescribed to participate in formal group activities to 'fill time' yet the dynamics of how this relates to reducing loneliness are poorly understood (Oman 2019). In one version of such interventions, loneliness is best remedied through creating new opportunities (such as social prescribing) and spaces for connection (such as the Co-op Foundation & Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Spaces to Connect* programme). We do not criticise these programmes as such and they are in fact very welcome in the conditions of austerity we have discussed. A young person struggling with entrenched feelings of loneliness may benefit greatly from reconnecting with other people through supported activities. Furthermore, the *Spaces to Connect* programme is part of an *Endangered Spaces* campaign to redress the loss of public spaces in England. It is important however to remain attentive to the possibility that an imperative to connect through loneliness interventions may become an additional pressure on an individual who, in refusing both such pressure and such connection, may then be perceived as 'failing to engage'.

The *Loneliness Connects Us* research provides a view of young people's social and emotional lives that is both relational and complex and includes an emphasis on the need to create positive opportunities for stillness and solitude. For a number of the young people we spoke to being alone was safer and preferable to being with others. The choice to be alone is a choice that can create resources against loneliness. Enabling young people to feel okay in their own company, to experience being by oneself in solitude as joyous, is therefore powerful. One of our youth co-researchers Sumaiya (23 years old, Manchester) struggled with mental ill health but found solace in solitude. She would walk alone late at night in a local park. Climbing trees, sitting on benches and hiding in bushes was where she found peace by herself. When she returned home she would sometimes write poetry and post it in an online forum. Sumaiya certainly found this path to connecting with herself through her own resources and in doing so she had received a considerable

support through the services at 42nd Street – a youth mental health and well-being charity. Making solitude as a resource concrete for young people requires more than a young person alone, and it is not necessarily cheap. In advocating for young people to access solitude, this is not license for policy makers to leave young people to it, to isolate or exclude them from infrastructures of care.

A second aspect of neoliberalising common sense on youth issues is a reliance on campaigns, in this case campaigns to reduce loneliness. There are established practice traditions for raising awareness, stigma reduction and normalisation in a range of public health and equality issues. Similarly, there is the UK Government's #LetsTalkLoneliness campaign with the tagline 'All of us can experience loneliness at some point in our lives. It's time we started talking about it.' (Let's Talk Loneliness 2020). The Co-op Foundation has launched the *Lonely not Alone* campaign co-produced with young people. The campaign encourages young people to talk about loneliness, and for people of all ages to wear yellow socks to communicate a quiet message that you are thinking of those experiencing loneliness. Such initiatives will be much strengthened by sharing evidence (such as has been presented here) about how they relate to a lack of investment in broader infrastructures of care and connection. The danger throughout the charitable sector currently is that the funding of professional marketing and digital media support to grassroots work provides a glossy finish on otherwise underfunded and struggling youth provision.

During the research we were approached by a number of organisations, projects and campaigns to advise on interventions to reduce youth loneliness. One involved a marketing campaign for students, which consisted of a series of social media images of young people in social scenes with (an equivalent phrasing of), 'Loneliness never looked so good!' The campaign was to be followed up with information and signposting to existing social infrastructure, such as university societies, counselling services. Yet these societies were not receiving extra support, investment and training from the university for responding to any lonely young people that might try to access them for support. Marketing and Comms as campaigning cannot exist as a standalone initiative. Communicating

messages to encourage people to open up and talk about loneliness and maybe engage with people who might be lonely is no doubt positive. And many of the young people we spoke to would not be ready to have such encounters and need support.

One of the recommendations proposed by young people at the Youth Summit we hosted to explore practical action emerging from the youth co-research was to inspire a social movement of young people to engage with youth loneliness. It is unclear what such a movement might look like, who the membership would be and what it would mean to them. We, however, should be sceptical of re-appropriation of the language of social movements with an emphasis on influence and change, disconnected from critical and political challenges to society. Instead it is instructive to think with the histories and experiences of the social movements that have worked to counter oppression and exploitation in the form of gay liberation, black rights, disability rights, and feminism. It is prudent to acknowledge the scale of the sustained activism, protest, organisation and the creative cultural work to articulate new identities, create new social arrangements required in changing perceptions about what it means to be gay, black, disabled, a woman or indeed lonely.

<2> Radical Democracy

During the research we repeatedly returned to the conclusion that the challenges posed by youth loneliness transcend the purview of, for example, a loneliness 'minister' or the traction of funded loneliness projects: radical change is necessary. The necessity for change was starkly affirmed when we met young people whose lives were most profoundly affected by the cruelty of plural structures of capitalist oppression, based on racism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy. We met a young Afghan refugee, traumatised by his life experiences, both in his homeland and in the UK, and currently sleeping rough. We met a young trans person who thought of themself with bittersweet humour as a skeleton. For these young people loneliness, isolation and disconnection was entangled with and exacerbating other forms of exclusion and marginalisation, anxiety and pain. Yet for other young people, ones we might not normally think of as 'outsiders', the unpleasant experiences of

loneliness were a feature of life, and the factors associated with both kinds of experience of the 'normal', whether included in or excluded from its terms, are set to entrench and accelerate. The majority of young people face an uncertain future, with narrowing life opportunities, immanent climate catastrophe and fraying social and emotional infrastructures of care and support (Green 2017). The activist refrain seems more urgent than ever: If not now, when? If not us, who?

In the introduction to this chapter we stated that youth loneliness transcends the purview of ministers or the traction of projects but this is not a counsel of despair. Rather we are confident that young people are more than capable of imagining and enacting more caring and convivial ways of relating to one another across difference and in commonality. Building on the youth work practices of the *Loneliness Connects Us* research which proposed to revitalise the loneliness agenda within the traditions of Paolo Freire – inspired Community Education, the research presented throughout this book is finally offered as a contribution to discussions of education and radical democracy.

Critical community educators formed in Freirean and Gramscian traditions would certainly have expected critical dialogue about loneliness to lead to a praxis of transformation. In Gramscian traditions of community development, this would have involved demands and practices which systematically sought to shift the balance of power towards the people and away from the power bloc. Such a form of struggle is harder to discern in contemporary conditions. Therefore, by radical democratic education we here refer both to the practices of radical democracy and the ways in which these practices are themselves educative (as for example when young people act as advocates together, or join a Trade Union) and to the pedagogies which open up new ways of being and acting in the world (the more informal practices of support and learning together discussed throughout the book).

We can see the democratic possibilities inherent in the ways we found young people making sense of their circumstances and, sometimes, negotiating new kinds of possibility for ways of being together in the face of extreme difficulty. They therefore have a good deal of insight to offer into

how to develop the practices of friendship, solidarity and mutual support we have recognised in the final chapters of this study, without guarantees of social transformation. We saw this in the FOMO project but also in the ways of being together which some of the research team embodied for the year in which the project happened, in unlikely friendships and resilient insistence that loneliness, though terrible, was not always the worst thing. There are clues in this study, therefore, for a research agenda that further develops our understanding of new ways to theorise and to practice a radical democratic community education both as enacting democratic power and as embodying practices of mutual support and care.

Pedagogies of hope and liberation do in themselves create new possibilities in contexts in which a fatalism about the (im)possibility of transformation has taken hold. Such perspectives on everyday struggles with loneliness which were shared in the process of this study require further enquiry and strengthening in radical democratic education to come. There are clues to be found in the methods which the research project adopted which built on the histories of Critical Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Youth and Community Work. These included practices such as the refusal to treat research participants or even their 'loneliness' as objects of study in which the researchers were the knowing subjects, which is entirely in accordance with the pedagogies of hope and courage which Freirean-inspired practice advocates. Through collaborative research methods, this study has contributed to the understanding of research creation practices as collaborative 'subject with subject' practices. As we have shown, especially in the practices associated with the production of 'Missing' and the tour, it was possible to create hopeful spaces of connection in the moment and for a depth of sharing and enquiry to occur. This was facilitated through aesthetic processes and was supported through a framework rooted in feminist approaches to the politics of the everyday, reaching an account of powerful experiences through small prompts and small stories, which cued responses which went beyond the 'scripted conversations' of which some forms of critical pedagogy have been accused. This was not a cartoon version of stripping away the illusions of powerlessness and loneliness in order to uncover the truth of connection. Rather, it was the openness of the critical

dialogues which 'Missing' facilitated which catalysed the sense of a prefigurative space, replete with as yet unnamed possibilities both within loneliness itself and its antidotes. We therefore argue very strongly that an open research-creation approach, with deep roots in performance and other aesthetic practices, will have much to offer both to the study of loneliness and to the re-emergence of radical democratic forms of community education as a prefigurative practice (Amsler, 2015; Fielding and Moss, 2010).

We can learn too from the ways in which movements that seek to create counter-practices to the hegemonic individualising practices of capitalism place a powerful emphasis on forms of care and mutual aid. Activist and alternative movements are not immune from oppressive relations, whether in the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1972) or the joylessness of 'rigid radicalism' (bergman and Montgomery 2017). These failures as such are not inevitable (although some form of failure is) and it is the continual negotiation of tendencies towards hierarchy and exclusion that is the focus of democratic organising. Indeed, care becomes an essential set of capacities and a survival strategy for navigating precarious worlds and living with marginalised identities. The traditionally undervalued nature of care means such capacities are open to co-optation by capitalist structures, adding additional burdens of care on already marginalised individuals and groups. Yet to care for one another is educative and prefigurative. As Hobart and Kneese (2020) explain,

"engaging in mutual aid projects teaches us essential skills that are denied in white patriarchal capitalism, such as collaboration, feedback, and participatory decision making." (p. 13)

These are all characteristics of the practice of radical democratic community education and critical participatory action research in which this study has its roots.

Whilst being 'new here' has been a critical lens for this research, in terms of our general findings we argue that rather than thinking of youth loneliness in terms of an unprecedented epochal rupture we have sought to think about continuities and inheritances especially in counter-practices which sought to build cultures of solidarity and friendship. An advantage of this approach is that we can

look to historical antecedents and seek to revitalise these traditions and forms of creative potential. For example, the Co-op Foundation funded the *Loneliness Connects Us* research, and the Co-op has been at the forefront of promoting the issue of loneliness (Kantar Public, Red Cross & Co-op 2016) and youth loneliness (Co-op Foundation 2018). The co-operative movement was founded in Rochdale in 1844 by a community that were no longer prepared to consume bread made with sawdust to increase profits for ruthless business owners. We might wonder if Co-operativism was the late 19th Century response to adulterated bread, then what might our collective wit and capacities develop as a co-operative response to the social conditions of youth loneliness. We are interested in the traditions and philosophical and ethical resources concerning the power of friendship, mutuality, association and co-operation. We issue a plea to make concrete again these resources, both in spaces and places already owned by the Co-operative Movement but also linked to the development of contemporary online cultural resources – especially through music, film and communication spaces – in order to make visible aspects of loneliness and mutuality, and to speak to the possibility of a different way of being. However, we could also look to the determination and social imagination of previous eras that built public parks, founded movements such as the Scouts and Woodcraft Folk, created spaces like the Lads and Girls Clubs, and invested in youth work practices, services and practitioners.

<2> Recommendations

A constant focus of the work with young people across all the activities was to explore ways of better understanding loneliness and practical strategies for young people to navigate experiences of loneliness. As an example, Missing the immersive theatre performance provided young people with an encounter with loneliness where there were no simple causes and no easy answers. The power of the performance is that the character was not someone one would expect to be lonely, she had friends, family, a relationship, and viable if frustrated plans for her future. Yet she struggled with loneliness. The performance of Missing ends with the question, 'What could I do? What could you do?' This started a dialogue with 160 young people in 20 groups across the UK. It was by building on

the youth co-research and then contextualising these findings through further events – the youth summit, Missing performances, and the FOMO legacy project – that we developed, tested and refined this list of recommendations:

Things we can all do or not do:

- ✓ Avoid the trap of thinking youth loneliness is a crisis or epidemic that affects all young people, be proportionate but aware
- ✓ Name and recognise loneliness among young people as a natural dimension to life and growing up – do not treat it as something to be ashamed or afraid of
- ✓ Don't automatically associate loneliness with depression and anxiety or other expressions of mental ill health, but recognise the possibility and be ready to offer or find the right support if it is needed
- ✓ Recognise how change and transition may impact on a young person's ability to connect and may lead to loneliness and support them through these changes
- ✓ Recognise how feeling different might create a sense of isolation and make an effort to think beyond your own experience and identity
- ✓ Recognise how poverty might impact on a young person's ability to join in, take part and feel a sense of belonging and find ways of getting round it. Make things possible for everybody: don't single people out
- ✓ Explore ways of thinking beyond the responsibility of individual young people to interpret and act in response to feeling loneliness, we need collective and societal change
- ✓ Recognise the additional pressures that social media can have on young people, but also recognise the positive relationships and connections that social media can offer

- ✓ Work to reduce the stigma of feeling lonely, normalise being alone and promote attitudes and experiences of solitude

- ✓ Recognise how cultural influences might impact on young people's expectations and behaviours and how groups that make belonging for one person might be making exclusion for others

- ✓ Work with young people to expand and create new cultural artefacts, relationships, resources and repertoires of social practice and action

- ✓ Recognise how academic achievement and the competition for success can be shadowed by the loneliness and disappointment of failure and the fear of disappointing others who have invested in a young person's potential success

- ✓ Recognise how difficult it may be for young people to acknowledge that they need help and or to articulate and ask for it: make it easier for them

- ✓ Value and encourage the ways young people find of supporting themselves and one another: notice and learn from the ways young people find to support one another

- ✓ Value and resource parks and open spaces with opportunities for safe ways of being alone and opportunities for connection

- ✓ Value and resource projects that make times and places for sharing interests, enthusiasms and many forms of creativity

- ✓ Start the conversation and don't give up on it, whilst creating opportunities for shared activities and interests where people can connect without talking, or at least before they start to talk

- ✓ Make and appreciate low-key offers of connection and companionship, especially at moments of difficulty or change

- ✓ Support the development of common spaces so all young people feel that they belong somewhere
- ✓ Build up the understanding of ‘friendship’ and what friends can do for and with one another; as well as what friends do not do if they are to remain our friend
- ✓ Try not to bottle things up

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