

## **From the Abyss of Loneliness to the Bliss of Solitude: Clinical, social and psychoanalytic perspectives**

Michael B. Buchholz & Aleksandar Dimitrijević (eds). 2022. Bicester: Phoenix Publishing House.

*All the lonely people  
Where do they all come from?  
All the lonely people  
Where do they all belong?*

‘Eleanor Rigby’, Lennon-McCartney (p121)

I was sixteen when the Beatles released this song with its heart-rending depiction of loneliness that topped the singles charts in many countries. Its bleak message about the realities of many peoples’ lives, unusual for a pop song, was admired by serious writers and poets. It portrayed a dark side of post-war Britain which I remember: bombsites, dire poverty, dislocated and lonely people in Fifties Liverpool.

The prevalence and importance of loneliness as a health issue has recently become a public health concern that recognises the serious effects we now know it has on both life quality and expectancy, and on the health service and the economy.

This book was largely compiled during the pandemic, a time when many were painfully lonely, but when some enjoyed their solitude as a time to take stock and reflect, or to embark on backburner projects in art, music and literature that needed the uninterrupted time to focus.

There are twenty chapters divided into four parts covering philosophy and culture, art and literature, developmental psychology and health, and psychoanalysis. Chapters are provided by the editors Aleksandar Dimitrijević (a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst) and Michael B. Buchholz (a psychologist, social scientist and psychoanalyst), together with seventeen contributors from around Europe, the UK and the United States, representing a range of specialties including practising therapists, psychologists, scientists, academics, a musicologist and a barrister.

The editors’ aim is to “offer a comprehensive treatise of loneliness and solitude [from a range of perspectives] while retaining a clinical psychoanalytic focus” (p xix). Opening with a discussion of definitions, they suggest loneliness is “a painful feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others which can occur when surrounded by people [...] solitude on the other hand is aloneness sought, sometimes even planned and desired” (p xix) to devote oneself to an activity. They add that while loneliness can have a disastrous effect on health, some solitude may be important for

personality development and good mental health.

I have selected four chapters I found particularly interesting and that show the spread of topics.

## Places of loneliness

Karin Dannecker, director of art therapy MA at Berlin-Weissensee Art Academy and a practising art therapist, opens her chapter with reference to ‘Eleanor Rigby’, attributing its success to a “deeply feared state of being alone when life is coming to its end” (p121).

She introduces some psychoanalytic concepts that support her work and gives two examples of therapy in her practice with clients who expressed their uncommunicative private experience of loneliness through artwork. She goes on to discuss three artists for whom aloneness, solitude, detachment and memories of losses are core issues in their work, and how art can communicate loneliness and be a medium to overcome it, providing comfort and encouragement. The artworks mentioned here are all viewable on Google.

Andrew Wyeth’s painting *Christina’s World* was inspired by a neighbour who suffered a degenerative muscular disorder. The woman in the picture is shown from behind, half-prone and gazing at a house which is out of reach due to her deformed limbs. Wyeth said it captured his own feelings when he was a weak and ill child, taken out of school and feeling alienated from his friends. Dannecker suggests it represents a general longing to escape loneliness but which may require huge effort, as for Christina.

Edward Hopper’s paintings depict alienation in the world and are known for invoking feelings of isolation. During the pandemic an anonymous WhatsApp messenger said, “We are all Edward Hopper paintings now” (p138). Of *Nighthawks*, Hopper said that in simplifying a familiar night scene he was unconsciously painting the loneliness of a large city.

In Hopper’s *People in the Sun*, a lone, relaxed figure reading behind four detached people suggests a solution to alienation. Dannecker says he is “participating in another world, sharing with the author what he had offered to the reader” (p140) so that in communing with another mind it is possible to be alone and not alone at the same time. I appreciated this description of how I experience reading, how across time and space we can be comforted and less alone.

Rachel Whiteread, a contemporary British sculpture artist, won the 1993 Turner prize for *House*. Made *in situ*, she cast concrete inside the walls of a condemned property which were then removed, making the private interior visible but a house without function, no access or escape and no space for anybody, suggesting “hurt feelings of loneliness and loss” (p142).

While thinking about this review, I mentioned it to a friend whom I know likes Hopper’s paintings and I assumed, like everyone else, sees

loneliness and alienation in them – she does not! For her *Nighthawks* is “Just people enjoying a late-night coffee in a clean and bright safe place”. Curiosity piqued, she asked her husband, who said, “Of course it’s about loneliness and isolation”. How extraordinary! Her take on *Gas Station* is “Something comforting, a man shutting up shop after a day’s work and now going home to a relaxing evening” whereas her husband sees “Alone and threatening – the forest over the road outside the light”. This is a graphic reminder of how we can see and experience things so differently. And how this can change, because looking again at *Nighthawks*, I too can now see and empathise with my friend’s take on it.

### **Loneliness and imaginary friends in childhood and adolescence**

Inge Seiffe-Krenke is a professor of developmental psychology and a trained psychoanalyst who has worked at several German and international universities. In this chapter she focuses on resources in dealing with loneliness, illustrating both theoretical concepts and empirical findings.

She discusses the different developmental functions of loneliness, showing it can be an important tool for the development of self and identity, and a method of regulating relationships. She outlines the reasons for loneliness during early stages of life and “the productive way children and adolescents deal with loneliness” (p174), and the importance of self-chosen loneliness.

Between 18 and 30 percent of all children and adolescents have an imaginary friend at some point. More girls than boys, explained Seiffe-Krenke due to “the greater dependency of girls on relationships in terms of identity and autonomy development” (p175). The fantasy provides an experience of love and support, enables individuation and disappears when it is no longer needed. Likewise, older children are more likely to have diary friends. There is evidence that adults who have had imaginary friends show higher levels of creativity, social skills and empathy than those who did not, except in the case of neglected and abused children.

Seiffe-Krenke stresses the importance of parents giving space to the child to gain competence and an independent identity and autonomy. She says that in most Western industrialised countries too much support over long periods can lead to negative consequences for health and higher rates of depression and anxiety. This caught my attention as recent significant increases in levels of anxiety in young adults are usually attributed to the pandemic, but some of it could be due to lack of appropriate levels of developmental ‘alone time’ when younger. She writes about various studies that cite dysfunctional parental styles such as controlling and intrusive behaviour and anxious monitoring, which may continue into adulthood creating ‘oppressive dependency’ (p181). Winnicott suggested this can

also happen in therapy if the therapist intervenes too early or knows too much, thereby “stealing the patient’s creativity” (p182).

Seiffe-Krenke concludes that more research is needed on helping traumatised children overcome loneliness and on cross-cultural aspects in diverse Western nations.

## **Loneliness and being alone**

Lesley Caldwell, a London-based psychoanalyst and honorary professor at UCL, explores this topic using as primary sources two papers; one written by Winnicott, ‘The capacity to be alone’, and the other by Melanie Klein, ‘On the sense of loneliness’, to review and compare their different theories and approaches to helping patients.

Both focus on the human infant but, unlike Klein, Winnicott rejected the idea of the “foundational moment of trauma and anxiety” (p272) and instead emphasised that gradual internalisation of reliability from mother/caregivers fosters the ability to be alone. He said, “the self’s encounter with itself is the central resource in meeting the aloneness that remains a human constant” (p268). Caldwell states that he does not directly address the matter of loneliness at all.

Klein does not mention solitude or the possibility of creative aspects of loneliness. She “regards life as a quest to allay loneliness” (p275) and Caldwell suggests this derives from Klein’s own struggles in life. Winnicott’s work in contrast, according to his wife Clare, derives from his own way of relating and being related to.

Caldwell concludes that while their different models of human subjectivity and its origins lead to vastly different understandings of the analyst’s role and the analytical relationship, both are pointing to ways that the therapist can strengthen the client’s ability to be alone.

## **Historical roots of solitude and private self**

In this chapter, Dimitrijevic suggests that what is taken for granted now in Western societies, a private self and personal identity, has not always been so, and still is not in some parts of the world. Some indigenous communities do not use personal names or have words for inner states.

Beginning with the Greeks, where ostracism was seen as the cruellest form of punishment, he reviews historical sources to map how we got here. He suggests changes came with Christianity (and ideas of private prayer) but that even in the late Middle Ages a clear distinction between private self and social roles was rare.

Then with advances in science, transport and urbanisation during the period we call early modern history, ideas of a private self began to appear and, Dimitrijevic suggests, we began to think of ourselves as self-defining

and self-improving. In art, people's faces started appearing as the focus instead of religious topics. Dürer was the first to consider himself as the painting's main subject, starting in 1484 at the age of thirteen; he produced six more self-portraits in his lifetime. He "created a visual form for the solitary, private self... milestones in the history of introspection... a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (p61).

Solitude became part of literature, beginning with Petrarch's *The Life of Solitude* in the mid-fourteenth century, followed by Montaigne's *Essay on Solitude*, published in 1571. Shakespeare, who lived during the transition from Renaissance into the Reformation, created and perfected the art of the soliloquy, reaching an apotheosis in *Hamlet* where in solitude (but out loud on stage) he tries to work out his own motivations. In Shakespeare's later plays we see his protagonists destroyed not by external events but by their own inner traits and choices.

In conclusion, Dimitrijevic writes that only at the end of the eighteenth century does loneliness get the meaning we give it today. It "is a relatively new concept and one we are still trying to adapt to" (p67), as evidenced by the paradoxical reality that while solitude is scarcely attainable, there exists a concurrent fear of loneliness.

This chapter provides an interesting summary of the development of ideas, but I am left wondering if it has been more an iterative than linear process. For example, Cicero's letters (which were discovered by Petrarch) indicated a reflective inner life, and when in exile he used his time to study and write, as well as planning his return. The Stoic Marcus Aurelius wrote about the struggles of life and how to improve oneself. Language, meaning and cultural norms have changed over time but feelings perhaps not so much.

## Conclusion

There is no mention of ChatGPT, which arrived after the pandemic in late 2022 and has only taken off since publication of this book. Already it has become widely and regularly used to alleviate loneliness, which seems helpful initially, but some studies indicate frequent use can have adverse effects, leading to increased social isolation and higher levels of loneliness. If the book were being compiled today, no doubt a chapter on it would be included.

Although I found this book hard-going at times it was stimulating and, finally, rewarding. With twenty chapters from nineteen different contributors (and topics), all were necessarily brief and some rather dense, perhaps to fit a word limit or just due to differences in style; some readers may find the chapters I have chosen hard-going. Nonetheless the editors have undoubtedly achieved their aim and the book is certainly a useful resource, with an abundance of references for further exploration.

**Diana Pringle**