LONELINESS, SOCIAL COHESION AND THE ROLE OF ART MAKING

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INTRODUCTION

Interest in the social sciences in rising rates of loneliness runs parallel to increased concern about weakening social cohesion. Both phenomena are described as complexly entwined with trust and agency and related to wellbeing at both individual and societal level.

Opinions are divided on how to alleviate loneliness and build social cohesion, yet there is coalescence around claims of the contribution of art making to both warding off loneliness and building social cohesion.

This talk draws on the work of Hannah Arendt and contemporary readings of her theory of loneliness, to suggest how art making can be efficacious and why it should play a central role in community building rather than be relegated to a peripheral desideratum.

Drawing on data from two studies into community art making, I briefly explore how the inter and intrapersonal processes of being seen and showing can alleviate loneliness, help restore agency and build social cohesion.

LONELINESS: A BEHAVIORAL EPIDEMIC

Referred to in The Economist in 2018 as "The Leprosy of the 21st Century", in The Lancet as a public health problem (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018) and as a "silent pandemic" (Wood, 2013) loneliness has held fast both academic and popular imagination for over two decades.

Regarded as an international public health issue (Gerst-Emerson and Jayawardhana 2015) loneliness health policy and interventions are being developed at pace, despite notes of caution about these (Akhter-Khan *et al.*, 2020). Social isolation and loneliness are recognised as priority public health policy issues for older people by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2021) and a systematic review of 2022 found evidence of problematic levels of loneliness "experienced by a substantial proportion of the population in many countries" (Surkalim, *et al.*, 2022, p.1).

THE PERSONAL LONELY IS POLITICAL

Aside from omissions of philosophical and psychoanalytic understanding of the phenomenon in much loneliness research, a view of loneliness that harnesses a perspective from political science is also limited, despite a surge in interest in questions of loneliness within that discipline. This tendency has downstream effects, contributing to trends of personalising, medicalising and pathologizing human experiences. Becker and colleagues (2021, p.961) urge that when we frame loneliness "we need to be mindful of the fact that its causes can be political as much as social and psychological".

WELLBEING , SOCIAL COHESION AND ART MAKING

While there is no universally agreed measure of wellbeing most indicators include hedonic dimensions such as happiness as well as eudemonic dimensions such as perceptions of meaning and purpose in one's life (Daykin *et al*., 2020). Yet current economic systems as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are committed to growth at all costs and based on the assumption that such growth is somehow synonymous with increasing wellbeing and prosperity through trickle-down economics, widely embraced by policymakers and economists to the right of the political centre while critiqued as myth or fallacy by many others (inter alia, Hope and Limberg, 2022; Wright-Maley, *et al*., 2023). Contemporary attitudes of individualism and growth that were once liberating now converge with environmental destruction and inequality, as well as soaring rates of psychological distress and illness, addiction and suicide.

COMMUNITY ART MAKING, LONELINESS AND SOCIAL COHESION

Art activity commonly falling under the umbrella of community arts has been cited as providing activity through which bridging and bonding, "connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" core to social capital (Putnam 2000, 19; Parr, 2011) and, more broadly, social cohesion can take place. Promoting social cohesion through participatory community arts projects has been reviewed in discussions of community development through the arts, (Matarasso, 1997) with some criticism that analysis of how participation and collaboration in the arts generate different kinds of social capital has been limited (Lee, 2013). Yet there are powerful testimonies to community art promoting social cohesion in specific cases (see, for example a study of community art in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, by Baumann, *et al*., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The two studies drawn on in this paper were part of a series of phenomenological narrative studies into the art making in community settings of adults with a range of enduring mental health difficulties (Sagan, 2014; Sagan, 2018; Sagan 2022). The exploration of lived experience was paramount and participants were encouraged to refer to examples of their art if and when they felt this aided the conversations. These, while free associative (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) maintained a structure and a purpose (Kvale, 2009). Ethical approval was granted by the host university and further consent was given for this re-anlaysis, on the basis of all data remaining confidential.

In these studies the term 'art making' is deliberately used throughout, rather than 'art' as the process of making is as important as and in many cases more important than the product.

FINDINGS

The studies yielded a number of themes, but the one returned to in the re-anlaysis on which this paper is based is that of *connection*, given its implications for social cohesion and for staving off loneliness. For this re-analysis, transcripts and recordings were revisited in order to explore narratives of connection (Sagan, 2014) and their correlated/subordinate themes in more depth. Across the participant data, the theme of connection, striking in its salience, was extracted along with narratives that were discursively associated with this strand.

| Connection	To myself
	To others
	To my art work
	To trust
	To disclosure / showing

SHOWING ONESELF AND BEING SEEN

Participants described the poignant experience of 'being seen' through one's art with an accompanying sense of restoration of the self. Monty mused that: *'I didn't know about that bit of me…[laughs] until I painted it, and then… talked about the painting to Harry [a fellow painter]'*. This experience then seemed to release the artist into the 'daring' act of disclosure, wherein they felt enabled to relate stories of things they had been through. Disclosure then moved some onto the formal display of one's work which for some artists, like Tilly, was at first *'worse than standing in the nude'*.

DISCUSSION AND TOWARDS A CLOSE

This paper contributes to literature that asserts that art making with others is powerful; as a means by which to begin to connect with one's self and regain a sense of agency; to become open to others and able to tolerate being more vulnerable; to feel seen and validated and part of a reciprocal current of these in others. To end, then, we return to the core challenge of demonstrating the subtlety of how art making can offset loneliness and help strengthen social cohesion.

The ideas of loneliness first propounded by Hannah Arendt and taken up in a contemporary revisiting by Sarah Lucas (2017) who introduces the concept of ontological agency with regards to Arendt's work are now briefly discussed.
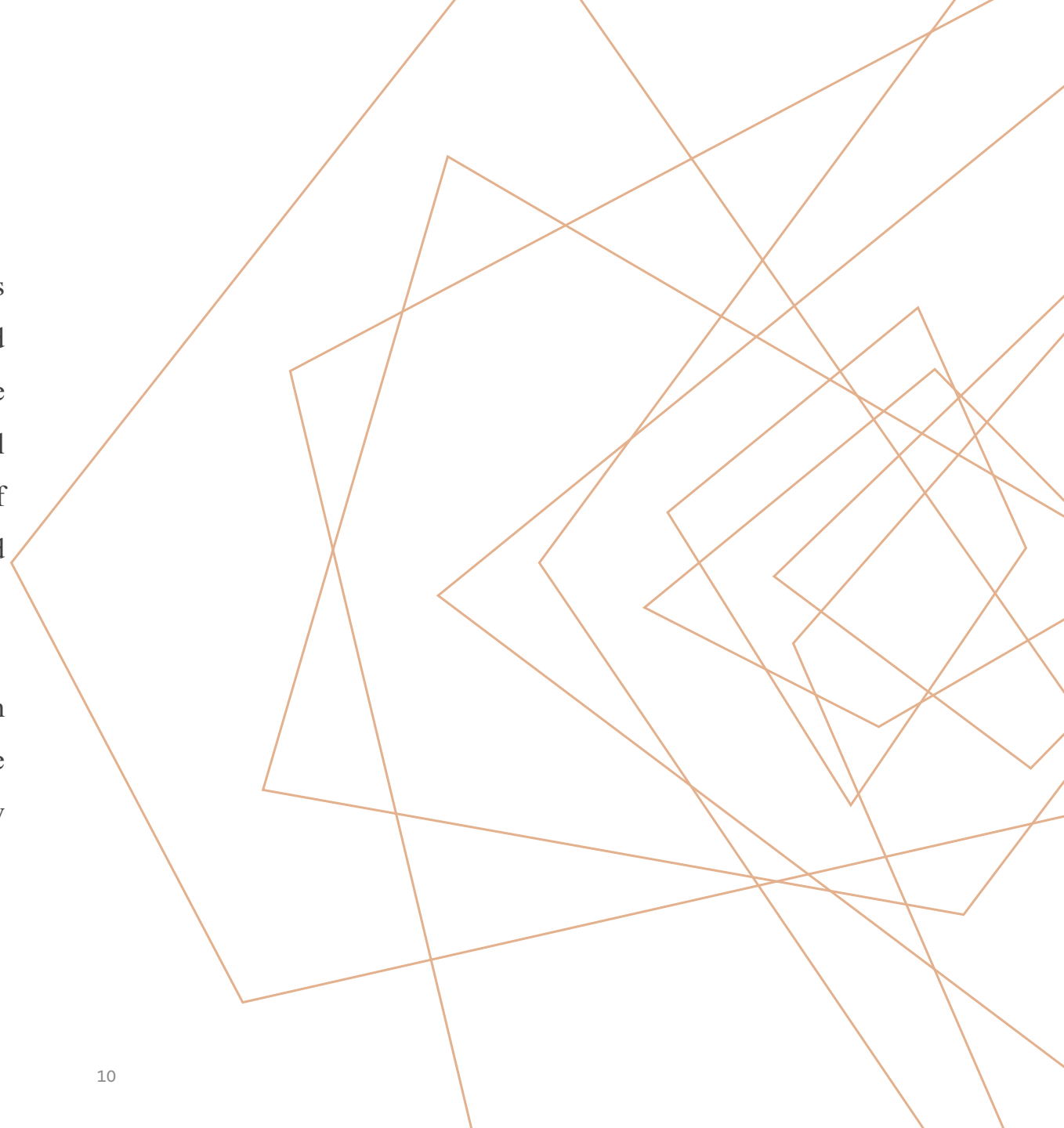
SOME CONCLUSIONS

The ontological challenges posed by Arendt and extended by Lucas speak to observations of the multiple malaises of neoliberal democracies, which are the subject of analyses across the social sciences (inter alia Jetten, *et al.,* 2021). Heightened individualism, disintegration of trust, surging inequality (Boarini, *et al.,* 2018) may, in no small part, be contributing to feeling 'not seen' and to experiencing, in an Arendtian sense, a loss of world (Arendt 1958). As argued by Nehra (2021, p. 4), also reading loneliness through an Arendtian lens, "Loneliness as a phenomenon emerges whenever there is a lack/absence of a tangible common world and connectedness."

The rise of political movements seeking to capitalise on widespread feelings of powerlessness, political disenfranchisement and loneliness chime with Arendt's earlier analysis. Perniciously, in loneliness, in the Arendtian scheme (Arendt, 1978) we trade our capacity to think for rhetorical and performative speech, and this barricades any thought, further frustrating communication with others, with ramifications not only for social cohesion, but for democratic processes. Not for nothing did Damon Linker (2021) suggest that if loneliness worsens it could lead to increased political polarization. But the effect is bidirectional; loneliness can stem from polarization, but it also indicates and forewarns of "something going wrong in the political domain" (Nehra, 2021, p. 17).

AND SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Research suggests that it is the quality of our relationships (Hawkley, *et al.,* 2008) that matters in supporting us to feel seen, validated and not alone and that daily local micro-transactions act as anchor points to root us to a sense of belonging and worth. This may explain the patchy evidence of efficacy of some loneliness interventions that assume it is meeting people that offsets loneliness and why "development of clearly defined loneliness interventions, high-quality trials of effectiveness, and identifying which approaches work best for whom is required." (Mann, *et al.,* 2017, p. 627). It is also important, as this paper has endeavoured to show, that we continue developing interdisciplinary probes of loneliness.

Art making, accessibly, equitably (Brook, *et al.,* 2020) safely, in a localised and inclusive setting that affirms the 'we-paradigm' of creativity (Tanggaard, 2020) has been shown to nurture quality interactions between people. It is a vital a force for agency, social cohesion and offsetting loneliness. This has clear implications for those of us working in clinical and community practice who have recognized the importance to our well-being and flourishing, of human connection with others.

THANK YOU