"There's nothing concrete round here": Loneliness and (in)security in austere times

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*Please note that this blog contains references to loneliness, eating disorders, mental and physical ill-health, and the effects of austerity and poverty.

In 2019 I spent the year talking to people who felt lonely. I had one-to-one chats, attended support groups, and took part in community-run events. This all happened before loneliness became part of the everyday vernacular as a result of Covid-19 and its associated isolation and physical distancing measures. While I was concerned that the relevance of my research in 2019 would be lost in the chaos and crisis of the pandemic, it quickly became clear that the insecurity of the pandemic was intimately linked to the insecurities I observed in my research. Loneliness is political and it is spatial – as were the associated vulnerabilities of the pandemic[i].

My research therefore opened up new ways to think about how crisis and everyday life collide. The way I understood crisis in my work was through the lens of austerity and socioeconomic inequalities. Rather than erasing the relevance of my research, the pandemic continued to show me how crisis (in whichever form – personally or politically) could push the most vulnerable to breaking point[ii]. My research was the first to give a detailed account of how loneliness is political and spatial. This helps gain a fresh understanding of loneliness, identify those who are most at risk of being lonely, while also highlighting that loneliness is embedded in the austere landscape, building on the work of Stenning and Hall (2018)[iii]. It also adds to literature that connects the political to the personal, particularly in the context of austerity[iv].

My research explored loneliness by understanding it from the perspective of millennials living in County Durham. I chose this place and this generation as I wanted to understand how temporal and spatial positioning can make some more vulnerable to loneliness than others. County Durham has a history of deindustrialisation, alongside deep, uneven austerity cuts affecting the area. Library closures, poor bus services, closed community centres, long waiting lists at the doctors, are all very real features of the County's austere landscape. I chose the millennial generation as research has shown that they have been condemned to a worse set of circumstances in which to live and work than the generation before them[v]. My instinct when I set out to do my research was that County Durham millennials would be more vulnerable to loneliness. My research supported this.

Here, I will tell Sarah's story, as her words are far more powerful than my own. Her's is just one story that spoke to the ways austerity, loneliness, everyday life and place collide, showing that loneliness is political, and it is spatial.

Sarah is 33 and two weeks before our interview, she was dismissed from her agency job. Sarah repeatedly reflected that being lonely was linked to her difficulty in securing work.

"…agencies know – they've got so many people going into work that they don't care. There is nothing concrete round here…and that makes it so difficult…to gain relationships or secure work because you're so disposable…Nothing concrete. Nothing permanent. It's all mainly agency…"

Not only did Sarah feel a lack of security as a result of the local labour market, she faced difficulty accessing the appropriate health care she needed and deserved. This left her feeling "like a number".

"They have every intention to not work with me. I have been discharged after six months. I have been living with these problems for as far back as I can remember. Eating disorder, not eating, not sleeping, sleep deprivation, PTSD, just constant…they discharged me after around six months…said I was fine – and then I ended up six stone two and deteriorated quite fast…They're more interested in how many people they can discharge from their services, I think, that's how it feels. I am a number. I am a number and they are not interested in helping me…"

"And I'm so exhausted with it all I just feel like going – sod it. I just can't be bothered…because I'm at that point where emotionally I don't really matter in the community anyway…They can't even be bothered to put any work in, so what's the point? So I just stay back to the life I already know…I'll just stay in, just stay in the house and not go anywhere."

The town where Sarah lived is rural. Buses are infrequent and unreliable. The few jobs that are available in the town are temporary and insecure. Being unable to rely on public transport meant that Sarah was geographically restricted when applying for jobs. This not only impacted her financially, it eroded her self-worth, and limited the pool of people she could interact with day-to-day. On top of this, her health suffered. The continued squeeze on healthcare and austerity cuts meant she was either on long waiting lists, discharged to another department[vi] or discharged completely. Her deteriorating health also compounded her feelings of loneliness, as it limited her desire and ability to leave the house, make friends, and build connections. Further, she felt like a "number", uncared for by health professionals.

Sarah's story helps highlight the ways loneliness is spatial and political. Her positioning in a County Durham town not only spoke to the ways rurality and loneliness collide, but the deep cuts and stretched services meant her feelings were exacerbated. The insecure labour market in the area meant she couldn't be financially secure, nor could she encounter new people and build connections. Insecurity featured heavily in Sarah's everyday life. The politics of austerity cuts had a very real, everyday effect on Sarah, which she articulated as feelings of loneliness.

My research has shown that to understand loneliness, to tackle it, is to take seriously the wider socio-economic and temporal context. Further, it has found that loneliness is intimately linked to austerity. Where there is crisis – whether austerity, a pandemic, the cost-of-living – loneliness is likely to emerge and persist, affecting those who are already the most vulnerable. Loneliness is political, and loneliness is spatial. Loneliness is woven into the austere landscape.

[i] See also: Kelly, J. (2022) '20 Babies Research Report', *Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art,* May 2022, Available at: http://balticplus.uk/20-babies-research-report-c35536/.

[ii] See also: Hall, S. M. (2021) 'Care, Covid-19 and crisis: Area as a space for critical contributions', 53, pp. 2-3.

[iii] Stenning, A. and Hall, S. M. (2018) 'On the frontline: Loneliness and the politics of austerity', *Discover Society,* 6th November, Available at: https://archive.discoversociety.org/2018/11/06/on-the-frontline-loneliness-and-the-politics-of-austerity/

[iv] See also: Hall, S. M. (2017) 'Personal, Relational and Intimate Geographies of Austerity: Ethical and Empirical Considerations', *Area,* 49 (3), pp. 303-310.

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Wilkinson, E. and Ortega-Alcazar, I. (2018) 'The right to be weary? Endurance and exhaustion in austere times', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 44, pp. 155-167.

[v] Jospeh Rowntree Foundation (2015) *The next generation is being condemned to a worse set of circumstances in which to live, work, and raise a family,* Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk.

[vi] See also: Kiely, E. (2021) 'Stasis disguised as motion: Waiting, endurance and the camouflaging of austerity in mental health services', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 46 (3), pp. 717-731.