

Article

Loneliness, Social Cohesion, and the Role of Art Making

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Abstract

Global interest in the 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 an individual and societal level. Whilst opinions are numerous and divided on how to alleviate loneliness and build social cohesion, there is some important coalescence around claims of the contribution of art making to both warding off loneliness and building social cohesion. This paper 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, the paper explores how the inter- and intrapersonal processes of being seen and showing can alleviate loneliness, begin to restore agency, and help build social cohesion.

Keywords: loneliness; social cohesion; art making; phenomenology; Arendt



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1. Introduction

Global interest in rising rates of loneliness [1] runs parallel to an increase in concern about weakening social cohesion, typically seen as a desirable feature of a social entity (i.e., community or society) and also as a feature that is currently deteriorating [2,3]. Both loneliness, increasingly recognised as a critical public health issue [4], and diminished social cohesion are regarded as posing risks to wellbeing [5], with both phenomena complexly entwined with trust [6] and agency [7]. Whilst opinions are divided and numerous on how to alleviate loneliness and build social cohesion, there is some coalescence around claims of the possible contribution of art making to both warding off loneliness [8] and building social cohesion [9], although evidence is as yet inconclusive.

This paper draws on the work of Hannah Arendt and contemporary readings of her theory of loneliness to frame why and 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. It draws on data from two studies into community arts making and explores how the inter- and intrapersonal processes of being seen and showing can alleviate loneliness and strengthen agency and social cohesion.

1.1. Loneliness: A Behavioral Epidemic [1]

Referred to in *The Economist* in 2018 as “The Leprosy of the 21st Century” in *The Lancet* as a public health problem [10] and a “silent pandemic” [11], loneliness has held fast in both academic and popular imagination for over two decades.

Regarded as an international public health issue [12], loneliness is recognised as a priority public health policy issue for older people by the World Health Organisation [13],

and a systematic review in 2022 found evidence of problematic levels of loneliness “experienced by a substantial proportion of the population in many countries” [14]. While loneliness health policy and interventions are being developed at pace, there is caution expressed about these [15] and poor evidence of their efficacy [16,17].

Despite its proliferation there are some observable limitations in the loneliness literature. Loneliness discourse invariably positions loneliness as a personal failure, depoliticising the contemporary conditions of loneliness, overlooking its relationship to social cohesion and emerging societal trends [4]. Its medicalisation [18] further impedes awareness that public health problems require robust integrated and holistic approaches [18]. The foci of studies that locate loneliness in the personal, framing it as “the antithesis of happiness” ([19], p. 9), contribute to a narrative that leads to self-stigma and withdrawal, precipitating further loneliness. Positioning loneliness as something shameful and potentially pathological [20,21], we overlook loneliness as a socioeconomic problem [22] how poverty intersects with loneliness [23]; and, as pointed out by Hari [24], how it flows from “multiple kinds of disempowerment”.

Loneliness research runs the risk too of reproducing unwarranted age-stage stereotypes [25], presenting it “as an unproblematic concept that is universally understood and experienced homogeneously” ([26], p. 51) and overlooking the potential role of social contagion [27] as a factor. Current definitions and measures of loneliness may be inhibiting the revelation of the cultural context and heterogeneity [28], as relatedly it has been noted that there is limited research on loneliness among minoritised communities, as well as amongst populations with severe mental illness [29]. The metrics of loneliness, therefore, are being questioned with calls for the field to be more granular in its understanding of diverse experiences of loneliness [15,30]. Loneliness, in short, is complex [31], and there are gaps “in our understanding of loneliness, rates and drivers of loneliness in different populations, its effect on health and wellbeing, and evidence on effective interventions” ([32], p. 114).

Work that engages with alternative readings of loneliness, offering more textured inquiry into what meaningful life consists with regard to our relationship with and to others, is also scant despite the centrality of loneliness to philosophy, as demonstrated by thinkers such as in [33]. Contemporary formulations of loneliness almost exclusively overlook its possible benefits [34], and views from philosophy that contribute to the subject of loneliness by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, or later philosophers such as Moustakas (1961) [35] and Erich Fromm are seldom referred to. Psychoanalytic theory, too, which has been long preoccupied with loneliness [36], is frequently neglected. And while it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the psychoanalytic canon with regard to loneliness (readers are referred to Buchholz and Dimitrijevic [37], and Willock et al. [36]), it is relevant to this paper that as far back as 1963, Carl Jung held that loneliness, rather than stemming from having few people around one, arose from “being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself” ([38], p. 356). This observation alone pre-empted powerful contemporary formulations on the role of epistemic trust in counteracting loneliness [39]. Psychoanalytic thinkers have also stressed the developmental value of nurturing the capacity to be alone [40], with Melanie Klein’s poignant theories on the roots of loneliness suggesting a creative rather than destructive side of the experience [41].

1.2. The Personal Lonely Is Political

Aside from omissions of philosophical and psychoanalytic understanding of the phenomenon in our contemporary reframing of loneliness, 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 [42] 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”.

A historical view, too, would help us see loneliness as an inevitability in post-developed society, where more individuals live, age, and die alone [26], much as a result of populations having more choice within the Global North. Choice about where we live for example—rising single-person households appear a trend extending across all world regions [43,44]—and with whom. The rise in alternatives to the family are welcomed [45] but also come at a cost. One such cost may be a lonelier existence that we, as 21st century citizens, need to find new ways to navigate.

The isolation of COVID-19 lockdowns and the consequent turning to internet echo chambers of high dudgeon along with a global eruption of right-wing populism, since energised by the 2016/2025 election of Donald Trump, converge to produce a climate in which loneliness can be weaponised [46]. This confluence of factors amongst others drives a renewed interest in the political theory of Hannah Arendt. In this cultural moment of headline loneliness, dramatic political fissures, disaffection with democratic processes, eroded trust in institutions [47], and the much-cited culture of narcissism [48], newly reshaped by Congleton [49], Arendt’s [50] work aptly describes the ‘non-thinking’ that is a consequence of citizens becoming isolated and vulnerable to political pathologies. Her work, which will be returned to in the discussion, gave us a first link to understanding the danger of loneliness as part of regimen control, placing it firmly in the political sphere.

It would appear that we need new tools with which to work with new instances of loneliness and better evidence and understanding on which to base such tools. Increasing interest across the social sciences interrogates how the arts may function as such tools. An upsurge in evidence synthesis, including scoping and systematic reviews [13,51,52], suggests a positive contribution of the arts to both individual and community wellbeing, and the next section turns to this.

1.3. 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 [26]. Yet current economic systems as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are committed to growth at all costs and are based on the assumption that such growth is synonymous with increasing wellbeing and prosperity. This is to be achieved 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 [53,54]. Contemporary attitudes of individualism and growth that were once liberating now may be seen to converge with environmental destruction and inequality, as well as soaring rates of psychological distress and illness, addiction, and suicide.

There are multiple international calls for governments worldwide to measure and monitor wellbeing, with strong cases made for the need to legislate for a good life [55] and for living well within limits [56]. A global movement is coalescing around the need to shift economies away from a narrow focus on marketed goods and services to one more broadly focused on ‘sustainable wellbeing’ and ‘beyond GDP’ [57]. As part of this new focus on the ‘wellbeing economy’, which is an economy that pursues human and ecological wellbeing instead of material growth [58], the arts are articulated in contemporary society as enhancing “wellbeing, health behaviours, and social engagement” ([59], p. 41). Furthermore, participation in the arts provides a supplement to medicine and social care and improves quality of life [60]. This is something ancient scholars knew; there are examples of use being made of the arts in healing rituals and early theories of medicine

from the Ancient world [61], and The Hippocratic Corpus (500 BC–AD 200) contains references to the use of art in health [62].

In contemporary social science, various disciplines [63] have been studying the impact of creative practices such as writing, music, dance, and painting for the past two decades. Research conducted by the World Health Organization [51] has shown that the use of artistic media in health care in communities can have a variety of positive health outcomes. Arts in health, whose practitioners' work is driven mainly by a social model of health and wellbeing as determined by factors beyond the individual [64], is now a well-a recognised area of diverse practice and research, landmarked with the publication of the *Journal of Arts in Health* in 2009. The journal and community of practice it represents attests to a growing international spread of arts in health practice and research, leveraging policy development and taking arts in health in some countries from grass-root activity to national policy [65]. As arts in health develops further, however, we should take note that the discourse on art practices in health has largely neglected Asian countries and China in particular, and remains marked by a Euro–American perspective [66]. Parkinson and White [67] make the case for participatory arts informed by thinking in public health playing a significant role in addressing international inequalities in health. They advocate looking beyond national overviews of the field to consider what would make for meaningful international practice in the arts and urge us to follow Latin American, Lithuanian, and Finnish developments in the field carefully.

From a wellness economy perspective, continuous material growth is unsustainable in so far as it takes a heavy toll on natural resources and ecosystems, but it also has a detrimental impact on psychological and physical wellness and on social cohesion [58]. Discussed by academics and policymakers since the time of Durkheim at the end of the 19th century, social cohesion, a term with multiple meanings [68], has figured prominently in social science research. Commonly used to refer to the 'glue' in communities, social cohesion and the quality social connections and activities that are crucial to people's quality of life forming part of this glue are often cited as warding off loneliness [69,70].

Social and environmental factors are thus converging to place in the spotlight the need for a better understanding of the relationship between art and health and how personal and societal philosophies interoperate towards more effective ways to create and share meaning and meaningfulness [71]. Research into both loneliness and the impact of art making on health clearly has a stake in debates about social cohesion, and vice versa. There is strong indication that galleries and museums can contribute to social cohesion and reduce social exclusion [72], and The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [73] states that "... access to the arts and free artistic cultural expression contribute to the development of critical thinking, to enhanced mutual understanding and to mutual respect. Thus, they contribute to reinforcing democratic citizenship and social cohesion. . ." But it is less clear how art *making* can help ward off loneliness and strengthen social cohesion, despite the 'common sense' appeal of making friends while being part of art groups—as the same could be said for any group activity. The remainder of this paper looks, therefore, at how art making can contribute to social cohesion and a lessening of loneliness, referencing the viewpoint of Hannah Arendt and contemporary readings of her work.

1.4. Community Art Making, Loneliness, and Social Cohesion

Art activity commonly falls under the umbrella of community arts and the definition used in this paper is from Maryo Gard Ewell, 2011 [74]: "Community art is of and by the people of a place and culture, often facilitated by a professional artist. It reflects the values, concerns, and meaning of living in that place or culture." It 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”, which are core to social capital [75] ([76], p. 19) and more broadly social cohesion, can take place. (For a discussion on how social capital should be considered a micro concept whereas social cohesion, as a broader concept, is more appropriate for macro analysis, see Klein, C. [77]) Promoting social cohesion through participatory community arts projects has been reviewed in discussions of community development through the arts [78], with some criticism that analysis of how participation and collaboration in the arts generate different kinds of social capital has been limited [79]. 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. [80]). Art making with this community aspect is most often referred to in regard to social cohesion, as it is said to lead to specific gains such as increased understanding of others, tolerance of difference, communication and authentic personal interactions, the forming of relationships and friendships, the engendering of empathy, and solidifying relationship through mutual trust and respect [79,81,82]. A common theme, therefore, is the way in which participation can break down barriers and build bridges between the self and others [83–85]. These findings relate clearly to Allport’s [86] classic contact hypothesis, now regarded by some as integrated theory [87], which suggests that direct contact between members of different social or cultural groups can reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relations, and promote mutual understanding.

Health psychologists in particular have been looking at how the arts might be used to heal emotional injuries, increase understanding of oneself and others, develop a capacity for self-reflection, reduce symptoms, and alter behaviours and thinking patterns [88]. Benefits reported include the cognitive ‘distraction’ provided by making art [89], as well as contributing to a reduction in stress and anxiety levels, psychological recovery, and personal growth [90]. Taking the evidence base for community-based arts on which this paper focuses, some studies also point to art enabling makers to discover a greater sense of purpose [91], promoting positive identity [92], and providing opportunities for mutuality [93]. There is evidence that the social capital [94] aspects of both bridging and, to a lesser extent, bonding, of making art with others, *are* the mechanisms that lead to psychological benefit. The evidence that people who participate in community-based arts reflect a diversity of demographic characteristics [9] is an important factor when considering the potential for building social cohesion and offsetting loneliness, and interest in this aspect of community arts is certainly growing [8].

Questions endure, however, about the active ingredients of art making with regard to warding off loneliness. We need to learn more about the micro-mechanisms that are at work in art making *as distinct* from any other community or group activity. This requires turning to the phenomenology of art making; understanding what meaning(s) the art maker ascribes to it and their experiences, and the value of such meanings for them. In this paper, I return to data from a series of phenomenological narrative studies into the community-based art making of adults with a range of mental health difficulties [95–97] to provide a re-analysis of the narratives of just *one* theme: connection. The data is further interrogated to explore what they can tell us about the experience of making art, social cohesion, and warding off loneliness. The discussion then draws on the work of Hannah Arendt and a contemporary reading of her work by Sarah Lucas [98], through which more light can be shone on the ‘isness’ [99] of making art and the social ramifications of this.

A body of research within art therapy demonstrates that the practice helps people cope with feelings of loneliness [100], and that group art therapy in particular can be effective [101]. Notwithstanding its clear value, art making within a clinical context has been criticised for its foundations in Eurocentric, cisgendered, heteronormative, and patriarchal

theories of human development, although work is well underway to upturn this [102]. The overt or covert asymmetric power relations argued to exist in therapeutic contexts, their relative limited accessibility and cost, and the presence of ‘expert’ and interpretive clinical dimensions of the work—aside from the different physical context—are some of the factors that make the experience wholly different to art making in community contexts, which is the focus here, and therefore art as therapy in a clinical practice is not discussed further in this paper.

There are several studies exploring how art works to build community and social cohesion, much of it drawing on Putnam’s social capital theory [103]. Most studies point to the solidarity of making art with others; the camaraderie, sense of belonging and safety, and the ‘good feelings’ factor. None of these findings are refuted here; community *activity* and access to it in all its forms is a foundational tenet and foundation block of democracy and has numerous links to wellbeing. This paper instead goes from the broad socio-political context outlined up to now in this paper to hone in on the minute; the phenomenology, as narrated, of the encounter with making art. In doing this, the small but vital calibrations in experience can be shown—those that occur to enable the art maker to move from showing oneself through one’s work, to being seen, gaining a sense of agency and generating “more relational outcomes . . . friendship, empathy, mutual trust, and mutual respect. . .” ([79], p. 13). The paper will then circle back to what this means in a broader societal context.

2. Methodology

The two studies drawn on in this paper were part of a series of phenomenological narrative studies into art making in community settings of adults with a range of enduring mental health difficulties [95–97]. (In these studies the term ‘art making’ is deliberately used throughout, rather than ‘art’ as the process of *making* emerged as important as, and in many cases more important than, the product.) 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 [104], maintained a structure and a purpose [105]. Ethical approval was granted by the host university and further consent was given for this re-analysis, on the basis of all data remaining confidential.

The original data totalled approximately 50 unstructured biographic interviews, for which there were multiple levels of consent in place. Most of these were audio recorded, but some were audio-visually recorded if participants wanted to refer to their art work and have them and the work visible. In some cases, only the art works are visible with the speaker off-camera throughout. An archive of images was also collected but these play no part in this re-analysis. Due to illness and conditions that sometimes hindered attention, confidence, or ability to communicate verbally, some interviews were taken as short segments and then edited together. In all cases, interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

3. Findings

The studies yielded a number of themes, but the one returned to in the re-analysis on which this paper is based is that of *connection*, given its salience in these studies and its implications for social cohesion and staving off loneliness. For this re-analysis, transcripts and recordings were revisited in order to explore narratives of connection [95] and their correlated/subordinate themes in more depth. Across the participant data, the theme of connection (however it was presented by the participant) was extracted along with narratives that were discursively associated with this strand. This extraction provided the following sub-themes:

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

The ways in which participants spoke of connection, a seemingly ‘simple’ concept, appeared to resonate with affect. The narrative was marked with pauses for thought; with reflective searching for words and terms; and with facial expression indicative of seeking to express a particular thought or experience that apparently carried weightier meaning, something elusive touching the sides of human experiences of belonging. These testimonies relate to social capital, both bridging and bonding, yet transcend these, provoking questions of identity, authenticity, entitlement, and of epistemic trust.

A small sample of the narrative extracts are given below.

Connection:	To myself Mabel said: <i>... worlds that exist within you can be revealed through the making... the painting and the drawing... it's something there that you've made, it's given you a connection with something outside of yourself but nevertheless part of yourself. That's the value of it.</i>
	To others Jude spoke of how: <i>... the drawing helped me have an 'in' to talking about [that] experience... and I brought it to the group, and we talked it through [pause]... and in a way... it led to us doing a joint work on 'places we've escaped from'. It was powerful stuff. Upshot was, a bit of me had been faced, together, connected—with others. I think they faced their bits too [laughs]...</i>
	To my art work Chloe described how: <i>It was no longer just about me [laughs]—my pictures of the sewing, when they were discussed, moved from me and my thoughts to others, how they made them feel, and how we, they... were all [laughs] stitched up! ...although that wasn't how I'd thought of it, on my own, like...</i>

To trust

Allan explained:

I work with a group of people, artists. . . and. . . erm, this has been a really big thing in terms of trust. . . I've had to. . . trust the 'encounter'. . . That [trust] is just well, big, for me.

To disclosure/showing

Laurence told us how:

Connection:

I had to exhibit this particular screen print and some others and I had to write an artist's statement and I was very, very honest in what I wrote and. . . well, I was expecting people to be quite negative and I dunno. . . just to judge me somehow, my connection to showing was. . . fraught. But I got a really positive response and I was told that it was very brave of me and bold and I received lots of really encouraging messages. It just really inspired me to keep going and that what I was doing was right.

Showing oneself and being seen [106].

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*'.

Disclosure and display figured as stations of the art journey, with it bridging from the private 'invisible' (painful) realm into the (challenging) social domain. For many artists, this disclosure and display element of art making galvanised. As Birdy put it, '*Once it's out there, you stand by it*'. There were many references to feeling shame and fear, but then pride.

What is notable in the narratives about gaining confidence to 'show' oneself, one's work, and the relationship between that act and feeling seen is the emergence of a sense of play; a dialectic between the art maker and their relationship with themselves, their relationship with the art made, the talking about both it and the self with others, the showing/displaying (of self and the work), and crucially, the feedback and what was experienced and spoken of as 'validation' through the connection. This feedback was not necessarily spoken of in terms of technical mastery but in terms of validation and reciprocity. This was experienced as a crucial benefit of art making. Aysel noted that what was so potent was:

'the acknowledgement that you are a person, that you exist, that your feelings, your thoughts, stuff you've lived through, they. . . count.'

Gabby said:

*‘There was just this spark. I showed, I talked, they listened, **they saw me**. Fucking hell, it was magic, mate, proper magic.’*

The following single, related theme of connection is now focused on, with the two sub-themes pertinent to this paper:

Connection:	To myself
	To others

In each study people spoke about the relationship between art making and mental wellbeing, telling a story of being in relation to and with others. According to testimonies, this ‘developing being’ required the establishing of trust and camaraderie; the sense of a space of safety and non-judgement and of being held by the project and its art works sufficiently to allow for safe exploration of stories and experiences. Part of this journey included, as Zoaf said: *‘finding out along the way for ourselves, what our own judgment sounded like; what experiences we were denying or denigrating’*.

For Fatma, art making offered the chance to explore ‘locked boxes we could, or could not open to explore the contents of’. Shaynee talked about how she felt she ‘didn’t quite exist... was invisible’ by default, only beginning to open up and gain a dimensionality through making art and engaging with others through it. This reflects a view of art making functioning as a site of inquiry and expression, offering no less than “a way of realizing and restoring the self” ([107], p. 49). There are pointers in this study, as in others, that the making of art functions on multiple levels. There are psychological mechanisms at work to help a maker create and (re)create the art work and themselves; to script and rescript in terms of Ricoeurian [108] progressive and regressive hermeneutics a unique site of exploration of one’s history and a shedding of old skins allowing for an alternative, perhaps more positive, narrative to emerge [109].

These subtle intrapsychic shifts breathed through in the way people talked about *‘seeing myself... everything that happened, differently’* (Chloe). Next, the articulation of these changes and the narrative and symbolism developed to speak of them, joined them in a dialogue with others. This was a process that often made participants feel, in Tobias’s words, *‘terrified’* yet also, *‘seen, recognised, validated’*. Art making, especially with others, becomes a powerful way in to mattering [110] through the power of recognition [111]. This comes through connecting “through giving form to feeling, artefacts or symbolic representations” which are then “‘shared in the world’ thereby increasing our connectedness with our social and physical environments” ([112], p. 298).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper contributes to literature that asserts that art making with others is powerful and is 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, and 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 Lucas [98], who introduces the concept of ontological agency with regard to Arendt’s work, are discussed.

The concept of agency raises at core two questions: who has it and how one obtains it. For Arendt, one means is by acting together—when people act in concert and create a common world, we develop a common language and understanding [50]. This enables us to make claims about our human and political rights. In this construction, people gain

agency through the power of recognition, through seeing and being seen, a point that has clear resonance with the narratives above. For Lucas [98] reading Arendt, appearance in the world is a form of agency. Loneliness, conversely, is the *failure* to appear as a self in the world; a point which echoes the testimony in the study above, about the perceived ‘invisibilities of self’—particularly as epiphenomena of long-term mental illness.

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 [113]. Heightened individualism, disintegration of trust, and surging inequality [47] may, in no small part, be contributing to feeling ‘not seen’ and to experiencing, in an Arendtian sense, a loss of world [114]. As argued by ([115], p. 4) 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 in 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 [116] 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 also for democratic processes. Not for nothing did Damon Linker suggest that if loneliness worsens it could lead to increased political polarisation. But the effect is bidirectional as loneliness can stem from polarisation, but it also indicates and forewarns of “something going wrong in the political domain” ([115], p. 17).

For Lucas, the capacity to appear as a unique self in the world is intersubjectively constructed in and through relationships with others. The experience of being seen and ‘recognised’ as part of a shared ‘something’ ushers in a sense of collectivity and agency, and we have some means by which to begin to notice the links suggested in this paper between making art, the development of agency, amelioration of loneliness, and social cohesion. A further link will also have been forged to work in the medical humanities, for example, that by Fonagy et al. [117], which points to the importance of epistemic trust—by which an individual or group of individuals can trust social sources of new knowledge in counteracting loneliness.

Research suggests that it is the quality of our relationships [10] 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” ([100], p. 627). It is also important, as this paper has endeavoured to show, that we continue developing interdisciplinary, subtle probes of loneliness, and avoid further assumptions about this very human experience.

Making art accessibly, equitably [118] safely, and in a localised and inclusive setting that affirms the ‘we-paradigm’ of creativity [119] has been shown to nurture quality interactions between people, in which they can gain glimpse experiences of being seen and validated through the bravery and vulnerability of showing. It is a vital force for agency, social cohesion, and offsetting loneliness. This has clear implications for those of us working in clinical and community practice who have recognised the importance to our wellbeing and flourishing of quality connection with ourselves and with others.

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