Alcohol and Loneliness: Their Entanglement and Social Constitution

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Abstract

I develop an externalist perspective and analysis of the relatedness of loneliness and (harmful) alcohol use and the concept of loneliness. I depart from twenty qualitative interviews with people undergoing inpatient treatment for alcohol dependence. Both, loneliness and its relatedness to alocohol dependence turn out to be complex relational and interactional phenomena whose occurrence and dynamics depend on the social and situational conditions under which they arise. Despite huge variations in interviewees' experiences of loneliness, they share a common phenomenological and analytical structure. Loneliness arises when instances of social interaction fail to arrive at mutual understanding within a certain social context. Loneliness is neither reducible to individual experiences nor to distinctive characteristics of a person. Rather, it presents an evaluative and interactional phenomenon, a person's awareness of his/her failure to establish mutual understanding with others in social interaction. The relatedness of alcohol dependence and loneliness is neither conceptual nor causal nor explainable by facts about the individuals concerned, but depends on the kind of loneliness involved and the function habitual ways of drinking alcohol have in a person's everyday life and social environment.

Keywords Loneliness · Alcohol dependence · Qualitative study · Phenomenology · Externalism · Self-evaluation · Stigma · Self-medication

1 Introduction

The relation between being lonely and drinking alcohol is not only well-established in commonsense and popular culture.[1] It is also empirically acknowledged that the prevalence of loneliness among people with dependence on alcohol or other substances has been found to be increased when compared with the general public (Ingram et al. 2020a). I procede from the relatedness of alcohol and loneliness in investigating two issues, the first one being the way in which alcohol and loneliness are related (Sects. 2, 3, 4, 5), the second one being the concept of loneliness itself (Sects. 5, 6, 7). The first part is empirical, presenting findings from twenty qualitative interviews with inpatients diagnosed with alcohol dependence or intoxication at the local University Hospital of Psychiatry.[2] In

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[1] The entanglement of alcohol and social life presents an endlessly recurrent topic in popular culture (e.g. James Bond, the film characters of Humphrey Bogart, the detectives of Raymond Chandler), in autobiographic fiction (Jamieson 2018, Jackson 1944), and recently, in the feature film *Druk* 2020 (= Vinterberg 2020; English: Another Round), which was awarded the Academy Award for the Best International Feature Film in 2021. Alcohol-related practices are constitutive elements of some religious rituals (e.g. the Holy Communion) as well as of secular cultural heritage and tradition (the Bavarian Oktoberfest). For the interrelations among alcohol consumption, production and regulation in the UK, see Haydock 2016.

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[2] My paper is based on 20 semi-structured interviews (O'Reilly 2009), which were conducted in 2018 by a then PhD candidate in Clinical Medicine, who is not identical with me (the author). At the time of the interviews, the interviewees received in-patient treatment at the University Hospital of Psychiatry in Basel, Switzerland. Their identity is not known to me. I have qualitatively evaluated the interviews according to Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006). This method allows to objectifiably and reproducibly evaluate qualitative data by extracting the relevant analytical and conceptual framework from the data themselves. It proceeds in four steps, i.e. (1) line-by-line coding (deciphering what is done), (2) identifying central topics and extracting key interpretative concepts and categories, (3) building an analytical framework by which to interpret the material, and (4) re-evaluating the material in the light of the analytical framework, verifying its adequacy, and refining the framework. Results from this study have been previously published as Lötscher et al (2022), and Schmid/Walter (2022), both in German.

the second part, I procede from several adequacy conditions on the concept of loneliness emerging from the empirical part in order to develop a structural analysis of the concept of loneliness which is independent of the lonely person's qualities or character traits, particularly of whether or not s/he is dependent on alcohol or other substances. My aim is to develop an externalist perspective on both, loneliness and its relatedness to alcohol, which allows for accommodating their complexity and multidimensional interrelatedness and provides a basis for further empirical and conceptual research in this field.

First, I give an overview over how experiences of loneliness are described within the interview material, focusing on whether or not there is something specific about the kind of loneliness experienced by people with (harmful) alcohol use or alcohol dependence, which could account for their being related (Sects. 2, 3, 4, 5). Although not explicitly asked for, loneliness presents a thread running through practically all interviews as a topic interviewees are existentially concerned with. Loneliness shows up in their describing situations from their everyday lives in which drinking alcohol plays a central role. In Sects. 2, 3, 4, I give a survey of loneliness as it becomes thematic in the context of alcohol consumption, focusing on three ways in which experiences of loneliness and alcohol consumption are interrelated: Experiencing loneliness presents an immediately motivating reason for interviewees' (harmful) alcohol consumption (Sect. 2). Loneliness in terms of being excluded from social interaction presents a threat which is sought to be avoided by engaging in social drinking and adopting socially compatible drinking practices (Sect. 3). Habitual heavy alcohol consumption itself issues in loneliness (Sect. 4).

The way in which loneliness is experienced and described widely varies across interviewees. Nonetheless, experiences of loneliness can be ideal-typically grouped together in three patterns (Sect. 5), i.e. experiences of loss and abandonment, emptiness and void, and estrangement from and not belonging to (some part of) one's everyday social environment. Their common denominator consists in their constitutively involving situational failure in trying to engage in social interaction and to access one's social environment.[3]

Interestingly, there is no straightforward relation between experiencing loneliness and drinking alcohol, especially no causal one. The experiences of loneliness reported in the interview material themselves neither form a unified group of phenomena, nor are they specific for people with (harmful) alcohol use or dependence. However, the material provides a sufficient basis to spell out several adequacy conditions for the concept of loneliness itself. Most importantly,

loneliness turns out a relational and interactional phenomenon, i.e. it cannot be accounted for without referring to the situations from which it arises, and to the social relationships and interactions in which it occurs.

In the second part of my paper, I develop a concept of loneliness which both meets the adequacy conditions taken from the interview material and is generally applicable independently of the persons who are involved, in particular, independently of whether or nor they are dependent on (or harmfully using) alcohol (Sects. 6, 7, 8).

Section 6 provides an analysis of social interaction and everyday social reality as to lay out the enabling structural conditions of loneliness. Participating in social reality amounts to sharing, with others, a common standpoint from which one proceeds in making sense of, experiencing, perceiving and engaging with one's environment (Schütz/Luckmann 1984). Establishing and joining a common standpoint is realised by bringing about mutual understanding in instances of linguistic and non-linguistic social interaction and communication in terms of arriving at common standards of truth for linguistic utterances and common standards of adequacy for expressive behaviour (Davidson 1986; Wittgenstein 1958). Loneliness results from a person's unability or unwillingness to arrive at mutual understanding with others despite his/her desire to do so. It manifests as experiencing others as transcending oneself (Schütz/Luckmann 1984) in that their standpoint is never fully accessible from one's own one, or, reversely, one's own standpoint is never fully communicable to them, or experienced as incompatable with their being different.

The three patterns of experiencing loneliness extracted from the interview material in Sect. 5 correspond to three structural aspects of experiencing others as transcendent to oneself (Sect. 7). Phenomenologically, instances of loneliness present as experiencing a breakdown of sociality, i.e. experiencing the possibility of engaging with others in social interaction as being negated on an existential level.

Upon further conceptual analysis (Sect. 8), loneliness involves a three-place reflective relation on part of the lonely person (Seemann 2022). More precisely, in loneliness, a person takes an evaluative stance on his/her own engaging in social relationships to the effect that they are judged insufficient as compared with his/her own ideas and desires (Ingram et al. 2020a; Buecker et al. 2021). Regarded as a self-evaluative attitude, loneliness turns out not only as an intrinsically social, but also as a complex normative phenomenon (Schmid 2011). In the closing section (Sect. 9), I suggest that the existential dimension of experiencing loneliness derives from concluding from situationally failing instances of social interaction to the fundamental impossibility of social interaction to bring about mutual understanding, whilst overlooking that one's experiencing loneliness itself

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[3] These findings are in strong agreement with findings from a qualitative study directly addressing the relation between loneliness and substance use disorders (Ingram et al. 2020b).

is conditioned on one's being embedded in a social environment in the first place.

2 From Loneliness to Alcohol Consumption

Loss and separation are frequently cited motifs in interviewees' explaining their taking up or resuming some sort of alcohol consumption. One interviewee (#3) ascribes his relapsing into harmful alcohol consumption after 14 years of abstinence to a double loss, the dissipation of the local corps of the Salvation Army, and his mother's death. Joining and thus belonging to the Salvation Army requires taking and keeping a vow to remain abstinent from drinking alcohol. His being integrated into 'his' corps moreover had provided a social environment within which he had been assigned particular tasks and functions and in whose social activities he was actively involved. As he was "full-filled" with his engagement, he reports not having had "the space" for developing any desire to drink alcohol. In turn, his mother's death meant losing the relationship with a beloved one as well as losing the responsibility for taking care of her over the last years of her life and his housing situation. The interviewee's resuming his alcohol consumption was grounded in the breakdown of various pillars of his everyday life.

Other interviewees refer to separating from their spouses or their children's leaving home as well as a close person's death or severe illness as situations in which drinking alcohol is a self-suggesting way of responding to subsequent changes in their ways of life. It serves as both, an immediate remedy alleviating the effects of sudden changes or life events and a stabiliser accompanying subsequent changes in one's living situation in the sense that regular drinking provides continuity which is getting lost elsewhere in one's life. One of the most important kinds of loss is losing one's job which combines elements of personal loss, loss of being embedded in everyday routines, loss of social recognition and status, and loss of one's living standard.

Yet, not every instance of loss leads towards drinking— one interviewee describes the separation from his wife as liberating –, and the presence of the objects of loss, i.e. being employed, being in a stable loving relationship, having a family life, does not suffice for preventing harmful alcohol consumption ("My wife would like to be a reason for me not to drink, but, alas, she isn't", #0). Quite to the contrary, pressure in the sense of becoming overwhelmed by one's family and/or job duties, boredom resulting from dull work below one's abilities or interests, are frequently cited motivators for drinking (#3, #8, #13, #15). As neither lacking nor losing social relationships as such present sufficient conditions for drinking alcohol, there is a hinge needed that provides the explanatory link between loss and alcohol, and I suggest this hinge to consist in loneliness. That social loss calls

for alleviation, and that alleviation from loss is sought in (harmfully) drinking alcohol becomes understandable only if loss issues in unbearable living circumstances, as situations of loneliness can be.[4] That is also to say that social loss is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for loneliness, and that, vice versa, standing in social relationships is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the absence of loneliness.

Several interviewees explicitly draw a connection between loneliness and drinking. One of them (#8) characterises situations of loneliness as situations of not knowing what to do with herself, of being alone at home without getting out, and also as situations of not getting out of herself, in the sense of not being able to connect with others. Loneliness is associated with shame in a reciprocal way: Shame prevents her from trusting others with her concerns, but not being able to make it alone fills her with shame. Loneliness, for her, comes into play when she is required to "wear a mask" in front of others, to pretend that everything is fine with her, when she has to settle things on her own, or is left alone with whatever she is concerned with, when she experiences being in a "psychic hole" (#8).

Two other interviewees (#14, #15) draw a line between their being foreigners and being lonely, especially emphasising their being forced to speak a language (German or Swiss German) which is very different from their native ones (Polish and Thai, respectively). Communicating in a foreign language "does not go into the heart" (#15), as one of them puts it.

Loneliness here is clearly distinguished from being alone. Although several other interviewees regard being alone as

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[4] As one reviewer pointed out, other 'negative affect states' can mediate between social loss and drinking alcohol, listing grief, depression, or anxiety. That would be true if the main function of (harmfully) drinking alcohol consisted in self-medication (as Khantzian 1985 proposed), i.e. as a way of coping with (enactingly or suppressingly) negative affective states or emotions that otherwise seem hardly endurable. I doubt that the cases are analogous for two reasons. (1) Loneliness, as I will argue in this paper, is neither itself a 'negative affect state' (of an individual), nor accompanied by specific affect states. Rather than in an affect state, loneliness consists in a situationally embedded, self-evaluative experience which constitutively entails a reference to a person's social relationships (Sects. 5, 6, 7, 8). Moreover, being lonely need not be experienced or evalued as a 'negative state' (not even for the lonely person), even if loneliness entails an unsatisfied desire (or wish), as I argue in the following. As there are desires which one prefers not to be satisfied, it is possible to find one's being lonely quite acceptable, or even to be glad about it (which I regard a positive experience). (2) The function of (harmfully) drinking alcohol exceeds the alleviation of unpleasurable states of mind (although it can serve as such), insofar as it is entangled with certain social practices as well as with a person's biographical and situational background (Sects. 4 and 8), of which self-medication is but one. The link between loneliness and (alcohol) dependence will be discussed in Sect. 8. For a critical discussion of Khantzian's self-medication hypothesis see Lembke 2012 and Henwood et al. 2007.

'not good for me when it gets too much', they generally agree on being alone being something enjoyable and the ability of being alone with oneself as something desirable. Equally, being in company appears at least as much a likely situation of being lonely as being on one's own is, perhaps even more so when it is experienced as standing aside or being excluded. Rather than being conditioned on the presence or absence of personal relationships, loneliness is associated with not knowing one's way about in a situation, with situative disorientation, or dissonance, with unease, boredom, emptiness and alienation, with detachment from one's world, others, or oneself. Also, loneliness is linked to helplessness, as in illness, chronic pain, and failure of the body after an accident.

Alcohol is found suitable to ease experiences of loneliness for several reasons. Physiologically, alcohol blurs perception, sensation and thinking, and thus alleviates the sharpness of distinctions, be them between objects or between oneself and others. As a kind of self-medication (#1, #2), it sedates and tranquilizes physical and psychological pain, it interrupts and silences recurring strains of thoughts. Drinking alcohol alleviates feelings of internal emptiness and void, it distracts from worries and concerns, and (seemingly) provides a substantial answer to doubts concerning the meaning of one's life. Habitually drinking alcohol provides something to do, which is technically easy, has immediate effects and thus brings about experiences of self-efficacy. The activity of drinking itself and organising one's life around drinking keep one busy, they structure time and space and allow to simulate a 'normal' everyday life. Eventually, one's own drinking practices are interwoven with social practices of drinking which are part of everyday culture. Hence, drinking alcohol and joining others in drinking provides an easy and affordable (Kilian 2022) access to social space.

3 "Everybody Likes a Drink": Alcohol at the Bottom of Society

Alcohol, says one interviewee, is the "people's drug number one". This is to say that drinking alcohol is deeply engraved in our everyday culture, in social practices and rituals of drinking. Several interviewees recount their being raised in environments in which drinking or otherwise consuming certain amounts of alcohol during the day or at specific times of the day was omnipresent and, even for young children (#2), an ordinary thing to watch and do (Cook et al. 2022). Some interviewees grew up with alcohol dependent parents (#4) or siblings (#3) or have alcohol-dependent partners (#4), some were raised in wine-growing areas. Drinking practices establish, structure and foster social relations, as for example after-work-drinking (#0), initiation rituals

among adolescents (at school/college, boyscouts: #11, #12; military service: #11, Osborne et al. 2022), rituals marking transitions in life or constituting social and gender identity (Gefou-Madianou 1992; Cook et al. 2022), drinks in the context of business lunches and negotiations (#19).

Social drinking and social practices of drinking demarcate social groups from one another. They serve as markers of distinction between members and non-members, as criteria for inclusion or exclusion with respect to particular groups and milieus. Individual drinking habits indicate a person's social class and status and can be employed to distinguish oneself from members of other classes. One interviewee (#19) describes alcoholic drinks as non-negotiable ingredient of business lunches availing himself of expressions suitable to prove his drinking a matter of situational course, not of decision ('naturally', 'one does'). In his descriptions, he appears as a natural inhabitant of airport business lounges waited by 'attendants', who cannot help his glass being filled "as by itself". He utilises such phrasing for presenting himself as an experienced traveller and connoisseur to the interviewer (a significantly younger, male PhD-student) and simultaneously distinguishing himself from his fellow patients ("Certainly, I am not a typical patient for this ward, certainly not").[5]

Once drinking alcohol is entrenched in the practices constituting and maintaining a social system, 'not drinking' (i.e. not drinking alcohol), or daring to ask for the ingredients of drinks or food (as to whether or not they contain alcohol) is, under certain circumstances, tantamount to setting oneself apart from the social system in question (Romo 2016). Such alcohol-avoiding behaviour suggests something being unusual and invites 'silly questions' (#6) requiring a plausible explanation as to why one cannot possibly accept the drink (such as pregnancy or illness). If inclusion in a particular group explicitly or implicitly requires participating in shared drinking practices, not participating by not drinking means (self-) exclusion from the group. Under such circumstances, a drink can turn into an offer one cannot refuse – on pain of losing reputation or status within the group, risking stigmatization or exclusion, or even committing social suicide. Not drinking alcohol thus means risking loneliness with respect to the group, if membership is something desirable or indispensable.

For some interviewees, giving up their own alcohol consumption calls for radically restructuring their social environment (#18). Breaking up friendships and other familiar

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[5] In a slightly different context, Roger Scruton demonstrates his conoisseurship of both wines and philosophy in his guide 'What to Drink with What' (published in the appendix to his book 'I Drink Therefore I Am', Scruton (2009)) in which he matches individual wines with individual philosophical works.

social relationships, moving to a new neighbourhood, ignoring formerly salient clues in one's perceptual surroundings, such as location and opening times of bars or the attention-seeking placement of alcoholic drinks in supermarkets, deliberately seeking social contexts in which drinking alcohol has no role to play, and still acquiring and maintaining new practices of spatially and temporally structuring one's everyday life — the price for maintaining abstinence from alcohol outside a clinic's protecting walls is high (if not too high), and interviewees' rating the requirements of living an alcohol-free everyday life as (overly) demanding seems more than realistic.

4 "Nobody Likes a Drunk": Loneliness as a Result from Alcohol Consumption

A third, still different way loneliness becomes thematic in my material is the kind of loneliness resulting from alcohol consumption itself. Repeatedly losing one's job as soon as one's drinking alcohol is discovered, and thereby entering a vitious circle leading the way downwards, is one of the most reported topics in the interviews. Ascribing alcoholism to someone not only prompts associating stereotypical images with the respective person, such as being constantly drunk in public,[6] homelessness, or poverty. Substance dependence, and alcohol dependence more specifically, are more stigmatised and evoke more negative attitudes than other psychiatric diagnoses, both among the general public and among health care professionals (Schomerus et al. 2011; van Boekel et al. 2013; Rundle et al. 2021).[7] Interviewees report being sneered at by psychiatrists, nurses, and fellow patients (with other diagnoses) equally (#9).

The popularity of social drinking does not contradict alcohol dependency being framed in terms of an impairment of character or the will (Maier 2021), if not a moral deficiency (Schomerus et al. 2014). The slogan "Everybody Likes a Drink. Nobody Likes a Drunk" from a 1970s public health campaign in the UK (Mold 2016), gives best evidence for that—and who, one might

ask, likes the stereotypical drunkard? Being judged an alcoholic implies being suspected to be morally reprehensible and potentially a- or antisocial in character and often results in being outlawed from society (Goffman 1963; Seear 2020; Zwick et al. 2020), although the same alcoholic could, by the same token, be regarded an "overachiever" with respect to social drinking practices (Flanagan 2019).

Being dependent on alcohol changes and destroys relationships. Being observed in a state of drunkenness (#2), being found unconscious by one's own children (#1), waking up in the emergency ward without knowing how and why one got there (#19) are situations of utmost shame and incline interviewees to hide their alcohol consumption from even their closest ones.

Regular alcohol consumption results in bodily changes—two interviewees describe their feeling disgust at their sweating (#13, #17), disturbances in skin condition, or digestion (Ribeiro Soares and Messas 2022). Changes in personality, loss of self-control, not meeting up to one's intentions to refrain from drinking, are responded to with loss of self-esteem, self-alienation, self-condemnation, self-condemnation up to the point of being ready to surrender oneself to alcohol, or, as one interviewee puts it: to consciously decide to get drunk, and to thereby opt out from the world.

Such modes of self-alienation and self-detachment echo and re-enact detachment and exclusion interviewees experience within their social environment. Attempting to prevent or cope with such responses by withdrawing from social contexts and hiding their alcohol-related conduct, they anticipate and bring about their own social detachment and exclusion. Their fear of social exclusion once their alcohol consumption is disclosed operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Kummetat et al. 2022). Excluding themselves from even their closest social contexts reproduces the very situation having motivated their alcohol consumption at first place. Consequently, it both drives interviewees deeper into harmful drinking and presents reasons for others to further withdraw from interviewees. One interviewee (#17) describes her life as being captured in a kind of rat race, leading her from experiences of loneliness within her social environment to consuming alcohol, which pushes her even deeper into a state of loneliness in which she cannot trust herself and her own body, detaches herself from herself letting herself down, drinks more in order to forget herself and ultimately to annihilate herself. Involuntarily, she thereby reiterates the stereotypes underlying the social stigmatization she is confronted with: The circle composed from loneliness, alcohol consumption, stigmatisation, social exclusion, deeper loneliness, solidifies with every round into the proverbial 'iron cage' from which it seems impossible to escape.

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[6] Against this stereotype, see Tuithof et al. 2022: Not every heavy drinker qualifies as alcohol-dependent, and not every alcohol-dependent person is a heavy drinker or tolerates over-average quantities of alcohol.

[7] It is still common in clinical practice as well as medical research to refer to alcohol addiction with the expression 'alcohol abuse' instead of using the more neutral, official diagnostic terms 'harmful (pattern of) use of alcohol' and 'alcohol addiction', respectively, as I do here (see The World Health Organisation (2019)). A search on Pubmed, the most encompassing database of medical research, for the term "alcohol abuse" delivered more than 16.000 results dating from the last twenty years, for the term "substance abuse" more than 46.000 (same range of time).

5 Three Patterns of Experiencing Loneliness

The survey of the various manifestations of loneliness articulated in the interview material suggests that the word loneliness does not designate a single phenomenon. Differences among episodes of loneliness concern their temporal duration (momentary, transient, persistent, recurrent), their evolvement over time with respect to amplitude and intensity, the degree to which loneliness is consciously experienced and articulable as such, and the experiential qualities accompanying them. More importantly, the structural patterns of episodes of loneliness, the ways in which they are embedded in a person's life, and their significance for and impact on a person's conduct vary.

Throughout the interviews, loneliness is consistently distinguished from being alone in that loneliness can be experienced in company of others and in spite of being in close or fulfilling relationships. Loneliness is distinct from social exclusion and isolation. Although both can constitute or bring about a person's being lonely, they need not—when, for instance, a person is excluded or isolated from a social group the person does not want to belong to anyway. Even when temporally extended, social exclusion or isolation do not necessarily issue in loneliness—everybody is isolated or excluded from some social group at every moment of their lives, and still there are lonely and not so lonely people. Despite the variety in which experiences of loneliness appear in the interview material, they can be ideal-typically grouped in three categories (which, in reality, can overlap and merge into one another): experiences of helplessness and being abandoned, experiences of emptiness and (self-) alienation, and experiences of social exclusion and not belonging.

Situations typical of experiencing loneliness as abandonment are situations following loss of or sepration from a closely related person. One interviewee relates (rises in) her alcohol consumption to being left by her husband for another woman (#1), another one to the death of a parent (#3), a third one to his wife's being hospitalised over several weeks (#9). Helplessness is experienced in situations of illness, or being unable to cope with one's job duties or family needs (e.g. living with a severely ill partner, #2, #4) without being supported by others. Drinking in such situations can be meant as a "cry for help" (#2), i.e. as an alarming signal that is supposed to prompt others to take some of one's worries or tasks. The experience of abandonment is grounded in missing the kind of intersubjectivity providing the basis of joint action and perception, shared intentions and beliefs—as a family would do (#2). Abandonment is not necessarily conditioned on missing or being left by a particular person (such as one's deceased mother, #3). Equally, it is about lacking someone as a partner or companion, someone for engaging in one's everyday life as well as for establishing and sharing a common world-view, i.e. shared ways of experiencing, perceiving, and acting. Not anyone would do, though, a person, or several ones, is longed for who encourages and acknowledges oneself, who notices and cares when one is in need (#6, #7), and helps in coping with one's everyday worries (e.g. a trustworthy psychiatrist (#2, #4) or a GP, #9).

Experiences of emptiness and self-alienation, of being lost or being nothing, manifest loneliness in a structurally different way. In describing their experiencing, interviewees use expressions such as 'falling into an inner hole', 'not knowing what to do', 'having too much time', 'being of no use', or simply 'boredom'. Self-alienation further manifests as experiencing one's own body as alien or foreign, e.g. after having an accident (#16), a chronic illness (pain: #14), or as unreliable, often as a result from one's own alcohol consumption (#13, #17). Typically, episodes of feeling empty are linked to missing regularities (such as temporal structures, #4) as well as to monotony and repetitiveness in one's everyday life (#15). Somewhat paradoxically, they also emerge from situations in which external structures and demands are experienced as overpowering (#5, #9), or exhausting (in the context of work: #1, #14, #15; Marx 1872) to the effect that there is nothing left of oneself but an empty shell. In such contexts, interviewees report being unable to stop thinking about work (#14, #15, #18), being overworked and burnt out (#1, #2, #15), not withstanding the demands of others (#10), or not being able to be oneself among others (#8).

Underlying these experiences of emptiness, I suggest, there is the experience of having lost oneself, of oneself as missing or absent. The role of external structures and regularities, and others' needs and demands for such experiences to occur is framed ambivalently, sometimes within one and the same interview (#1, #5, #15)—self-loss is reported to equally result from too strict and too loose temporal structures, from being needed and not being needed. This ambivalence indicates that experiences of having lost and missing oneself are grounded in the inability to develop and maintain a temporally stable self-conception independently of the presence or absence of others, independently of externally (i.e. not by oneself) determined everyday structures. Lacking a robust self-conception, i.e. the awareness of being someone even if one is not in company, on the one hand manifests in being incapable of deciding or even imagining what to do in the absence of others' guidance or command. On the other hand, it manifests in experiencing external structures as overpowering or exhausting oneself to nothingness. Acting upon or in accordance with the demands, needs, or wishes of others makes it difficult to recognise such doings as one's own, originating from one's own agency. Feeling oneself empty results from realising that one has spent one's energy on others' projects, rather than one's own, without leaving any for oneself.

Emptiness and self-alienation as experiential manifestations of self-loss indirectly refer to the absence of others which is the reason why I suggest to consider them a separate kind of loneliness. Such others are missing in whose presence the subject would be able to experience him-/herself as a coherent self who is different from these others and whose integrity is not impaired by their presence (Winnicott 1958, 1971). Experiences of emptiness or self-alienation indicate that the subject is not able to conceive of her-/himself as someone among others who have quite a different conception of the subject than s/he has him-/herself, who are different from what the subject thinks (fancies, wishes, etc.) they are (Mead 1934), and whose 'gaze' (i.e. the conceptions they entertain of the subject, Sartre 1943) the subject is able to withstand.

The third pattern of loneliness emerging from interviewees' descriptions manifests as experiencing oneself as not belonging or an alien, or experiences of being displaced or disoriented within one's social environment. Typically, this kind of loneliness arises in situations of being excluded from particular social contexts (e.g. losing her work environment after ten years time, #7), being exhausted by work below one's abilities and standards ('boreout'), of (self-)alienation at one's job, or of changing one's social environment (e.g. as a result of migration). Experiences of not belonging to a certain social context indicates a person's lack of ability or possibility to engage in everyday practices common to the context in question. They arise in situations in which one's access to (some part of) social normality is interrupted, blocked, or breaks down. The social relationships missing here need not be personal or intimate in kind—anyone would do. At stake is being involved in social relationships as such and being able to establish social relationships within one's everyday social environment. Remedy is often sought by participating in (local) drinking practices and frequenting the respective locations (Engels 1892, 1876; Vogt 1995). The point of participating in social drinking is less to relate to particular others but to (re-)establish some kind of social life and normality in a more substantial sense. Particularly, it allows to acquire a social identity with respect to the social (drinking) context, i.e. to be 'someone' in a particular realm of society (Mead 1934).

The three typical patterns of experiencing loneliness emerging from the interview material differ on a structural level with respect to the relationships that are experienced as deficient. The first pattern (helplessness, loss, separation) indicates the absence of individual, though not necessarily specific persons with whom one could engage in joint actions, joint undertakings, or joint experiences. In the second group (emptiness, self-alienation), the missing kind of relationship is constitutive for oneself being someone, even for oneself. Here, a constitutive condition of recognising oneself as an individual, autonomous subject is not met. The third pattern (not belonging) indicates not having access to a social environment in which one plays a role that is adequate to oneself, in which it matters what one does, and whose constitution is partly depending on one's own contributing to its respective shape.

This way of differentiating three categories of loneliness is mainly analytic in purpose. Albeit structurally different, the categories are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that the same episode or situation of experiencing loneliness shows elements of more than one pattern or that it changes its pattern over time. For example, experiencing loneliness in situations of being exhausted or overly demanded by family or job duties can be interpreted as an instance of either of the three patterns described. Whether the experience involved rather exemplifies being helpless than feeling alienated or empty, or not being integrated in one's social environment, respectively, depends on the person and situation involved. The same goes for what (or who) is experienced as missing — is it a companion, who would take over some of the work one feels overloaded with? Is it oneself whom one experiences as drowning or burnt out, leaving an empty shell? Or is one's social environment experienced as ignoring or depreciating what one does for it? These and similar questions can only be answered when looking at individual cases.

There are two results emerging from my overview over the interview material so far, one concerning the relation of (harmful) alcohol use and dependence and loneliness, the other one concerning the concept of loneliness itself. Despite the significantly increased prevalence of loneliness among people with (harmful) alcohol use and dependence as compared with the general public (Ingram et al. 2020a) and despite the commonsensical plausibility of relating alcohol and loneliness recorded in popular culture, it is difficult to determine the kind of relation being at issue here. Particularly, there is no causal link between experiencing loneliness and (harmfully) drinking alcohol or developing alcohol dependency. Drinking alcohol can be both cause (Sect. 3) and effect (Sect. 1) of experiencing loneliness (Ingram et al. 2020a), both, drinking and not drinking alcohol can cause loneliness, and drinking alcohol can be undertaken both, in order to prevent from and to alleviate loneliness (Sect. 2). If, by contrary, drinking alcohol and experiencing loneliness were straightforwardly connected, one could expect changes in drinking behaviour to have stable, if not even predictable, effects on a person's experiencing loneliness, or vice versa, which is not the case (Bragard et al. 2022).

Moreover, there is not a particular kind of loneliness specific for people with (harmful) alcohol use and dependence. Neither the situations nor the experiences of loneliness described in the interviews form a coherent group, they

are variable and contradicting. Situations of loneliness that are experienced as existentially emergency situations by one person appear utterly unproblematic or even desirable for another. Also, the experiences and situations described as typical for loneliness − loss of a close one or a working environment, being outcasted from society or excluded from one's peer group, feeling alien, displaced or disoriented in a foreign country, having to hide oneself, one's mood, opinions or feelings in the presence of others—do not appear to deviate from situations and experiences that would commonsensically count as such, and the same holds for the ambivalent and contradictory framing of the role individual others and social relationships more generally play for loneliness.

For this reason, the interview material can serve as a basis for a closer investigation into the concept of loneliness itself, which I will undertake in the following (Sects. 5, 6, 7). Loneliness does not consist in either, an individual's state of mind or a particular quality of experience, but emerges from a person's interacting with others and being embedded in her/his social environment, more precisely, from failures arising in his/her attempts of doing so. Hence, conceptually analysing loneliness has to involve an account of social interaction which makes understandable how and which kind of breakdowns in sociality result in experiencing loneliness (Sect. 5), allowing for sociality to be framed ambivalently. Particularly, the resulting concept of loneliness ought to structurally accommodate the three patterns of loneliness I have differentiated in this section, i.e. loneliness in terms of lacking another person (as in experiences of helplessness or abandonment), lacking a social environment (as in experiences of being alien or not belonging), and lacking a conception of others' being different from oneself and thus lacking a stable self-conception independently of the presence or absence of others (as in experiences of emptiness and self-alienation), which will be the topic of Sect. 6. Finally, the variety of situations in which loneliness is experienced and its being independent of whether others are present or absent suggest that there are neither subjective (e.g. particular feelings or other mental states) nor objective (e.g. the obtaining particular kinds of relationship) criteria by which one could judge a person lonely independently of the person's own judgment. A conceptual analysis of loneliness thus needs to draw on a person's own standards concerning which kinds of social relationships, social interaction and being socially embedded qualify as fulfilling or unfulfilling (Sect. 7). The resulting concept of loneliness will be brought to bear on the experiences of loneliness as described in the interview material in Sect. 8, where I will also come back to the relatedness of alcohol and loneliness I departed from.

6 The Structure of 'Social Reality' and Situational Understanding

The futility of trying to overcome loneliness by drinking alcohol indicates that loneliness is a phenomenon inextricably intertwined with the social environment from which it arises. Phenomenologically speaking, it belongs to the existential conditions of human being, in that it presents the counterpart of what Heidegger calls 'Being-with' (*Mitsein*), or sociality. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes two ways in which sociality is manifested in the life-world (Heidegger 1927). The 'authentic' mode is realised in interpersonal relations of reciprocal care ('*Fürsorge*') in which participants are concerned with fostering the other's unique being. In this mode, persons address one another in the grammatical second person, as a 'thou' (Buber), i.e. the distinctive persons who they really are. The 'inauthentic' mode of sociality is identified with everyday world. Heidegger presents everyday social reality as a space in which everybody is replaceable by everybody else, and hence as good as nobody, even for oneself. In relating to individual others, they are reduced to the indefinite grammatical third person (any-) one, i.e. individual representatives of the anonymous mass, or, in Heideggerian terms, the 'They'.

A more substantial and less derogative phenomenological account of everyday social life is given by Schütz/Luckmann (1984) in their *Structures of the Life-World*. They translate the Heideggerian 'Being-with' into the truism that one is not alone in the world, that there are others in the world as one is oneself, and that the world is equally structured by others' being in it, as it is by one's own. This truism is accompanied by a second one, i.e. that others are different in their having a different standpoint in the world in that they occupy a different spatial location, are situated at another point in social reality, and have a different perspective on the world fom oneself. Everyday (social) reality is basically structured by social practices of making sense of, experiencing, perceiving, and engaging with the world. Participating in the social world—and thus realising sociality—basically consists in adopting and implementing social practices in one's 'life-world', i.e. in one's everyday doings and feelings, thinking and experiencing. Embodying social practices in their bodily constitution, posture and habits, participants share in and contribute to constituting and maintaining a common practical, experiential and conceptual standpoint.

A common standpoint develops within the intersections of individual standpoints as the space into which an individual can transcend him-/herself. Participating in the practices of the social world shapes and enlarges one's own range of possibilities of interacting with the world. Vice versa, one's own instantiating social practices influences others' ways of interpreting these practices themselves, albeit minimally.

This is to say that not only the social world, but also one's own life-world is equally shaped by others' standpoints as by one's own. In this manner, individual standpoints interlace with one another and blur into a common one. In effect, establishing a common life-world amounts to establishing a common system of practical and perceptual relevance as well as linguistic reference and meaning, i.e. a common agential and epistemic perspective, a world-view (Schütz 1962; Wittgenstein 1958, 1969).

Understanding and interacting with one another in particular instances is possible inasmuch as participants succeed in aligning their individual systems of relevance and reference to the effect that they thereby constitute a shared one.[8] I suggest to conceive of developing a common standpoint as a dynamic process consisting in bringing about mutual understanding in instances of social interaction. Situational understanding in the context of linguistic communication as well as of non-linguistic interaction makes use of and results in establishing a common system of reference, which itself emerges from the course the interaction takes. In interacting, participants establish what Davidson (1986) has called a 'passing theory' for the case of linguistic communication, i.e. a shared 'theory of truth'[9] by means of which they manage to interpret one another's expressions correctly.

According to Davidson, understanding one another involves participants' constantly aligning the manner how they (are used and inclined to) perceive and interpret one another with how the respective others go on to speak or otherwise behave in the course the situation further takes. As the situation proceeds, participants' 'evidence', i.e. the body of observations made of the others' and their responses to their own behaving, grows and enables them to modify their initial ways of interpreting one another as well as their initial ways of expressing themselves. We may think of this process as a series of experiments: hypotheses are formed about what the others do and say, are tested in the following instances of others' doing and saying something, and revised in the light of further such evidence.

Reversely, participants use patterns of behaviour and ways of expressing themselves in language which they deem suitable to make themselves understandable, i.e. induce others to interpret them as they intend to be interpreted. In choosing their manner of speaking they take into account the system of reference they ascribe to others, derived from the impression they have got of the others by their way of engaging in the interaction so far, and the view of themselves they assume the others to have, whilst they might be interested in getting the other to change his/her first impression.[10] In the light of this, they—tentatively—use expressions and/or behavioural patterns which they think will make the others interpret them as they want to be interpreted, which again comprises that the others understand them in the way they want to be understood, and that they get the right impression of them.

This process of interpreting, making oneself interpretable, and being interpreted, issues what Davidson calls a 'passing theory', on parts of both, the interpreters and the speakers. The passing theory amounts to a theory concerning how to interpret one another in a situation of linguistic communication or other interaction. The passing theories are, as Davidson puts it, "geared to the occasion" (p. 101), they are essentially transient, provisional in kind, and not only open to, but also in need of constant revision. Participants succeed in understanding one another if they manage to align their individual passing theories such that they maximally coincide.[11] In this case, they share a passing theory, i.e. the theory which individual passing theories asymptotically approach, or, as I have called it earlier, a common system of reference.

Drawing on this system of reference continuously developing during their interacting enables participants both, to

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[8] I will henceforth use the expressions 'system of reference', or 'framework of reference', respectively, instead of the longer 'system of relevance and reference' for brevity's sake. As having a system of reference involves having a system of relevance, since linguistic and conceptual reference is entangled with one's overall interacting with one's situational and over-situational environment, nothing is lost in using the shorter version.

[9] The theory of truth need not be consciously available for either of the participants. It presents a heuristic construct which serves to explicate, from an observer's or philosopher's standpoint, what goes on between the participants (Davidson 1986, p. 95f.).

[10] A formidable example of this is what happens in one of the interviews cited above: The interviewee (#19) takes the interviewer to initially view him as a 'typical patient of the psychiatric ward specialised on alcohol withdrawal and treatment of severe cases of alcohol use disorder'. During the interview, the interviewee seeks to change this assumption he ascribes to the interviewer. Implicitly, he does so in picturing himself as a businessman, whose alcohol consumption is an expression of connoisseurship as well as of his social status as a successful and internationally acknowledged traveller, rather than of alcohol dependency (what the interviewee thinks the interviewer thinks it does). Explicitly, he does so in emphasising that he is 'certainly' not a 'typical patient for this ward' (see above, Sect. 2).

[11] This is not to say that individual participants contribute equally to the emerging passing theory. Whether or not at all and to which extent any indivdual participant does, and thus, who has to adopt the others' individual theories to which extent, adapt his/her own ways of making sense of the others to those of others, and accept the others' ways of understanding him/herself, depends, among others, on the relations holding among the participants, of the role they situationally play, their overall social position, and the relations of power obtaining in the group. What I have in mind here includes instances of engaging in interaction with absent, anonymous or representative others, e.g. in communicative acts with the authorities, such as in filing one's tax documents, or other institutions or administrative bodies, such as negotiating with a customer service spokesperson.

make sense of each others' linguistic and non-linguistic expressions and to differentiate their own ways of expressing as well as to adopt and modify another one's as to suit their own purposes. In this sense, establishing a common system of reference enlarges the scope of their possibilities of experiencing and acting, making sense of the world or others and expressing themselves. In Schütz/Luckmann's terminology introduced above, it enables participants to transcend themselves into the intersection of social reality constituted in the course of their interacting.

On Schütz/Luckmann's analysis of social reality, the situational formation of a shared system of reference appears to be primarily a matter of whether or not participants individual systems of reference initially overlap. However, agreement of participants' individual frameworks of reference is neither necessary nor sufficient for developing a shared system of reference in the course of social interaction. It is not sufficient as, for one, it could not account for understanding individual, situation-bound uses of expressions deviating from the uses participants would expect given their prior experience, which is the main topic of Davidson's essay. For another, complete agreement in frameworks of reference would amount to sameness of participants' individual standpoints, and thus participants' being identical. Hence, in social interaction there necessarily are individual ways of expressing oneself in play which other participants have not encountered before, such that they are not prepared to make sense of them from within their initial framework of reference.

Agreement of individual frameworks of reference is not necessary for successful interaction, either, as such agreement is developed in the course of the interaction in terms of establishing a passing theory as described above. As observing one another includes observing others' way of engaging with the situational surroundings, it becomes clear, for an interpreter, how the others perceive and experience the situation, i.e. what kind of situation it is, which aspects of one's environment are salient to their perception, which of them are relevant for what they are up to do. In this sense it is possible, for an interpreter, to establish a 'theory' about the others' systems of reference and relevance, as they are expressed in the others' engaging in that situation. Such a theory will comprise assumptions about their beliefs and intentions, about what they hold true and find worth doing. Hence, it comprises assumptions about the truth-conditions of the others' beliefs as implied by their conduct, that is, about what is the case for them, and thus the reality they live in. By the same token, it comprises assumptions about their habitual ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. Similarly, observing others' doings allows for generating assumptions about their motivational attitudes, and deriving from them what they find adequate to do in the situation, in particular, what they find adequate ways to interact with one another.

In social interaction, participants depart from their individual standpoints, having those conceptual, perceptual and agential frameworks at their disposal that are element of their habitual ways of interacting with others and their individual ways of engaging with the world. Initially, they deploy them in their manner of interpreting others' utterances and non-linguistic behaviour as well as in expressing themselves; they act and interact, make sense of others and express themselves, as they are used to. Participants' initial frameworks of reference include assumptions as to their counterparts' frameworks of reference as well as hypotheses concerning their initial agreement, derived from the first impression participants get from one another.

Though not necessary for successful intercation, having some part of one's individual framework of reference in common may nonetheless facilitate understanding, as participants will need less effort in aligning their systems of references, the greater the initial overlap of their frameworks of reference is. Of course, this does not discharge participants from verifying their impression of initially sharing such a system of reference and aligning them to a common one. But the closer their individual ones are, the closer they are to the shared one they asymptotically approach whilst interacting, and the less work there is to be done in order to succeed in mutual understanding.

As a dynamic process which to initiate and conduct is, to a certain degree, up to the participants, establishing a common system of reference not only enables, but also requires participants to transcend themselves and to adapt their habitual ways of interacting with others to the situation at hand. If they are interested in understanding one another in the sense of arriving at agreement in their passing theories, they have to take into account other participants' individual ways of expressing themselves and making sense of one's own expressions. This requires participants' readiness to alterate their habitual ways of experiencing, acting, and interacting, to expose themselves to others, and to risk all kinds of possible failure in social interaction.

Hence, the possibility of establishing and entering such a common standpoint is limited by individuals' capacity and willingness to make their own systems of reference compatible with, understandable for, and susceptible to those of others. As others are different from oneself, they obtain different experiential and practical standpoints in the world. Others' standpoints inalterably lie beyond one's own and in this sense, they present transcendencies to oneself in an at least threefold sense. For one, their standpoints are never completely accessible in understanding for oneself (if they were, another one would not be another one, but identical with oneself), as one's own standpoint is never completely accessible from another one's. Reversely, the ways in which others relate to, make sense of and conceptualise oneself are not fully at one's disposal (and vice versa).

Finally, understanding one another is limited by the general limitations on establishing agreement on how to interact with and treat one another within social interactions and relationships.

7 The Phenomenology of Loneliness

The three structural aspects of the transcendency of others mirror the three experiential patterns of loneliness I have described above. At the core of experiencing loneliness as emptiness or being lost there is a lack of either recognising or acknowledging others' being different from oneself or the beliefs and imaginations of them one employs, the needs and wishes one addresses to them. Here, the conception of the other as different—his/her otherness—transcends one's acceptance, understanding, or cognition. Not distinguishing between oneself and others means regarding both standpoints as identical. Not acknowledging or not recognising others' being different structurally correlates to conceiving oneself as being 'all or nothing'. Consequently, others' absence or their being not at one's disposal, i.e. the (logical) negation of their presence, is experienced as one's own absence, as negation of oneself, whereas their presence equally questions one's being oneself as different from the other. Under these conditions, others' presence leaves no space for oneself, i.e. the social space lying in the intersection of two different standpoints is exclusively filled by others. Reversely, others' absence implies the absence of an interpersonal space which one could occupy by identifying with them, and, a fortiori, experience oneself as (spatially) extended. Hence the nihilism and the suicidal ideation and mood which are characteristic for some interviewees' describing situations of utmost loneliness as situations in which, in their experience, another one's departure or absence leaves themselves as 'nothings' behind.

Experiencing loneliness in terms of not belonging, being alien or excluded, secondly, arises from social contexts in which participants' ways of making themselves understandable and making sense of one another's conduct cannot be brought into agreement. As commonsense ways of concluding from others' doings and sayings to their intentional and motivational attitudes diverge, so do cognitive and normative expectations concerning their further conduct. The more participants' prior theories differ from one another, the more adjustments are necessary in order to avoid misunderstanding and disappointment on all parts. Loneliness here arises from diverging self- and other-conceptions of the participants involved if they cannot be brought to coincide without thereby giving up one or several of them. If attempts to agree on common schemes of interpreting others and articulating oneself accordingly fail, participants will conceive of one another as unintelligible, as strangers to their own minds. Deeming attempts to make themselves understandable to others and

understand them futile amounts to giving up on arriving at mutual understanding and hence on sharing in a standpoint.

Finally, experiencing loneliness as loss or being abandoned involves both, experiencing others' standpoints as radically different from one's own and, more specifically, experiencing others as different concerning their expectations, desires, and needs in relationships. The kind of disagreement at stake concerns questions as to the degree of intimacy or which kind of behaviour is appropriate or inappropriate in a particular relationship, and as to whether or not a (particular) relationship should be taken up in the first place. Once attempts to engage with another in a particular kind of relationship are disappointed, the desired, but unrealised relationship lacks an object.

In both latter cases, the possibility of modifying and enlarging one's own system of reference in the course of developing a common one if only the relationship had been taken up is not realised. The potential intersection of social reality in which one had aimed to transcend oneself by taking up the relationship in question is experienced as missing. In comparison with the first pattern, the inaccessibility of others experienced here does not so much question one's own existence as it frustrates one's desire to share some sections of one's own and a particular other's world. It thus diminishes one's range of possibilities to alter and augment one's own standpoint or world-view.

Loneliness manifests in experiencing the boundary between oneself and others as insurmountable in both directions, and the realm of social reality others occupy as an inaccessible realm, lying beyond the limits of one's own world. In loneliness, others seem to more or less intentionally withdraw from one's own attempts to reach them in communication, and from one's attempts to engage with them in social interaction. From the futility of one's situationally or repeatedly attempting to establish a common standpoint with others, or joining an already existing one, one concludes their being essentially transcendent, i.e. their being unapproachable for oneself on a most fundamental, existential level. When loneliness manifests as the experience of losing oneself—be it in the presence of others or their absence—others' being different from oneself appears inconceivable or inacceptable, their 'otherness' transcends one's own understanding or acknowledgment. Under this condition, there is not even the possibility of trying to establish a common standpoint since this would presuppose to accept the ambivalent framing of others as both different from oneself and accessible in communication. Anticipating the futility of engaging with a different other in social interaction whilst remaining oneself issues in giving up on attempts to communicate with others, or, alternatively, on attempts to maintain (and defend) oneself in communication. On either alternative, the insurmountable gap between oneself and others is internalised, as the gap between those aspects of oneself which are identifiable with

the other, and those which are not, the latter ones being dissociated from oneself or denied, which again shows up, in experience, as self-loss.

Loneliness is instantiated independently of the degree of intimacy of the relationship at issue. Exclusion from particular areas of institutionalised reality (e.g. voting) or public everyday life (e.g. disabled-unfriendly architecture), not participating in or losing a work environment or not speaking a certain language or dialect can equally result in loneliness as losing or separating from a close person can. Loneliness can be, but need not be brought about by loss, depending on whether or not a person's death or departure, a group's dissipation or changing the rules sets an ending to a shared 'world', i.e. when particular meaningful and meaning-constituting practices cease to exist, as it was the case with the aforementioned interviewee's losing his mother and his corps of the Salvation Army.

Equally, experiences of loneliness are independent of the kind of relationship and the activity at issue—experiences of loneliness may be present in not being able to make oneself understandable in a philosophical discussion, not being able to establish or participate in a common daily routine, not being able to share in others' experiences, perceptions or projects, due to lacking the physical, imaginative or cognitive abilities that would be required. By analogy, loneliness can appear as having lost oneself, or being abandoned by oneself, and so become similar to being alienated or detached from oneself. This way of experiencing is typical for situations in which the responsibility for participating in a (potentially) shared practice being impossible is ascribed to oneself, and similarly in situations in which one fails to meet up to one's own standards, plans or desires, and situations in which one does not know what to do with oneself.

Phenomenologically, instances of loneliness present experiences of others as absolute transcendent and inaccessible for oneself. Loneliness is realised in experience when a person's everyday reality, or take on everyday reality, radically differs from that of others, or is experienced as such. Resultingly, it is impossible for the person to participate in a particular area of the social world by contributing to, adopting, or negotiating the practices which are constitutive for this area.[12] Loneliness comes down to a failure of or breakdown

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[12] Experiencing the difference of others as an absolute one, means being aware of one truism of social reality—that one is different from others − at the cost of the other one—that one is like others. If thus experiencing another's being different seems inacceptable, identifying with others on pain of losing oneself appears to be the only option of 'being with' others. However, the downside of this way of 'engaging' with others is that there is nothing of oneself left, as soon as others are absent, and nothing but others there (i.e. nothing of oneself) when they are present. Loneliness here, i.e. the awareness of having lost oneself, rests on the inacceptability of the inaccessability of others (which, as indicated, itself can be due to not being aware of others' being both, different from and like oneself).

in sociality of both Heideggerian modes, the mode of interpersonal 'I-thou' relationships as well as the impersonal ones of everyday social reality. It does not amount to an aspect or a variation of what Heidegger called the 'deteriorated', inauthentic mode of sociality. Rather, loneliness appears as the possibility of sociality's being negated and as such to belong to the existential conditions of human life, as a corrolary of sociality itself.

8 The Concept of Loneliness

Phenomenologically speaking, thus, loneliness amounts to the experience of an existential contradiction, viz. that, although one is not alone in the world (Schütz/Luckmann), one is, in the end, alone (Heidegger) when it comes to trying to overcome the difference between oneself and others. The phenomenological account of loneliness accommodates for the existentially threatening dimension its experience can involve, as it does for the variability of loneliness as a phenomenon. Conceiving of loneliness as an existential condition of human life also suggests that there is nothing pathological about loneliness, i.e. nothing that could be eliminated from human life. Experiences of loneliness realise one (ontological) possibility of being a human being, and are, for this reason, an inevitable by-product of living a human life.

However, since whatever is actually experienced in human life amounts to instantiating a possibility of human experiencing, considering loneliness an existential condition of human being sounds somewhat truistic. That the truism at hand analyses into a contradiction, indicates there being an underlying misconception concerning the meaning of either conjunct. The misconception concerns the role the difference between oneself and others plays for social interaction, and it comes about by hypostatising situational failure of social interaction to an ontological necessity.

Earlier, I have rendered the phenomenological notion of sociality analytically, in terms of sharing in a framework of reference and relevance, or sharing a world-view. This is situationally instantiated by bringing about mutual understanding in instances of linguistic and non-linguistic communication and interaction. Mutual understanding results from participants' aligning their ways of interpreting one another, and of their conceptions of how others interpret their own (linguistic and non-linguistic) expressions. Crucially, mutual understanding, in terms of agreement in both, what their utterances say, their behaviour expresses, and of what counts as suitable behaviour to express what they intend to express, i.e. what counts as an utterance at all, emerges from negotiating one's own expressive behaviour with that of others as to establish such agreement in the first place (Wittgenstein 1958, §242). In other words, sharing

the same a framework of reference is the endpoint of social interaction, not its starting point.

Rather, as the process of establishing agreement starts, participants' initial ways of engaging with one another as well as with 'the world' are *radically different* exactly in the sense the phenomenological analysis of social reality involves (Davidson 1973/1984). Viz. that others' practical, experiential and conceptual standpoints in principle are different from one's own, and that different standpoints can never fully coincide (on pain of ceasing to be different). That participants in social interaction are different is a necessary condition of engaging in social interaction, be it successful or unsuccessful—if they weren't different, they would be identical, one and the same; still it takes (at least) two to engage in a relation. Different peoples' being different, that is, is not an obstacle to engaging in social interaction, even less a condition that would render understanding impossible, but, to the contrary, a condition of possibility of understanding.

How then can the existential dimension of experiencing loneliness be taken seriously that shows up in the contradiction of one's being not alone, but with others, and one's being nonetheless fundamentally alone? I suggest to read the contradiction at hand not as a contradiction between two ontological statements, one to the sociality of human beings, the other to the negation of sociality, but as a discrepancy between a normative and a factual statement, the truth-conditions of which are bound to particular situational circumstances. The statement articulating experiences of loneliness then reads 'I am alone though I *ought not* be'. If sociality is instantiated in situations of bringing about mutual understanding in social interaction, loneliness in terms of experiencing the 'negation of sociality' is instatiated in situations of *not* bringing about mutual understanding in social interaction. This allows to render the 'negation of sociality' loneliness phenomenologically speaking amounts to, an evaluative issue that concerns particular persons in particular situations, instead of an ontological one, which would concern all human beings at all times.

Accordingly, the statement *that a person X is lonely* involves the (logical) *negation* of a statement such as 'X succeeds in bringing about mutual understanding with Y in social interaction to a satisfiable degree', or simply 'X satisfiably engages in (a) social relationship(s) with Y', 'Y' standing for another person or a group of persons. Analytically, these statements amount to conjunctions of several qualifications predicated of X's engaging in social interaction, all of which have to be true for the conjunction to be true. Reversely, the statement 'X is lonely', is true if at least one of the conjuncts is false. For X's being lonely, that is, it is sufficient that any of the conjuncts is false, that something (not everything) in

the process of trying to establish mutual understanding with others goes wrong.[13]

Attempts to bring about mutual understanding can fail for various reasons, none of which must be present in all instances of such failure. Sometimes, a person's attempts to engage in a particular relationship fail because there is no one to engage with, or because others do not want to engage with the person themselves. Sometimes, mutual understanding cannot be brought about as participants fail or are not willing to bring their frameworks of reference to coincide. Sometimes, a person succeeds in engaging in a relationship with another, but not in the kind (or degree) of relationship desired. Sometimes, participating in a social context is not possible for someone due to not meeting with the necessary criteria for participating. And sometimes, the person seeking for engaging in a relationship is not capable of acknowledging the limitations of social interaction, i.e. that in order to relate to someone this someone has to be different, and cannot be identical with oneself, or with one's ideation of him/her. Here, engaging in relationships is doomed to failure from the start as what is strived for is inconceivable.

Hence, the variability of loneliness, as a phenomenon, results from structural reasons. It has to be considered, e.g. when it comes to drawing conclusions from a statement such as 'person X is lonely' as to this person's future behaviour, or current thoughts or feelings. That is, the criteria by which an episode of loneliness is individuated as an episode of loneliness equally vary across persons and situations, and can change over time. Rather than forming a unified class of phenomena, the manifestations of 'loneliness' are bound together by more or less obvious and stronger or weaker similarities in quite different respects without there being a particular characteristic or criterion that is met by all instances.

Most importantly, the judgement that a particular person is lonely implies an evaluative judgement, viz. that the person's social relationships are unsatisfiable *by the person's own standards*. The judgement that a particular person is lonely refers to the person's first-person perspective by drawing on the evaluative stance the person takes towards the quality of the social relationships s/he engages in. It cannot be reduced to the judgement as to whether or not the person succeeds in engaging in social relationships or whether or not (particular) social contexts are accessible for the person, be it in general or in

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[13] This is the reason for the huge variability in experiencing loneliness. It also explains some of the disagreement among conceptions of loneliness in philosophy, psychology and various disciplines of medicine. If an analysis is grounded in a too narrow selection of the structural elements involved in loneliness, it will fail to account for the variability of loneliness, and hence also fail to recognise some instances of loneliness. See Motta (2021), Bragard (2022).

particular.[14] This is to say that applying the concept of loneliness entails referring to a person's perceiving, experiencing, or judging there being a discrepancy between the person's actual engaging in social relationships (or contexts), and that s/he desires for.

Although this analysis draws on an experiential dimension inhering the concept of loneliness, it does not reduce loneliness to a feature of an individual person's mental or psychological constitution, such as an experiential quality, a feeling or sentiment, a disposition or specific vulnerability of a particular person to feel lonely. Focusing on a person's intrapersonal constitution, his/her experiencing his/her social relationships, or on a person's or group's likeliness to experience themselves as lonely, tends to disregard, if not altogether overlook, the structural and situational interpersonal conditions that are constitutive for a person's being lonely, and the structural and situational circumstances under which a person's loneliness is regarded a problem to the effect that it calls for political or medical interventions.

Conditioning the justifiability of the judgement that another one is lonely on a subjective criterion on the one hand would either amount to demanding there being a specific experience accompanying a person's being lonely the presence of which would decide the question as to whether the person is or is not lonely. Or the truth of judgements as to another person's loneliness would be conditioned on the other one's self-ascription of loneliness and thus on his/her consciousness of being lonely. In either case, it would not be possible to establish a concept of loneliness that could be used independently of whom it is attributed to.

Loneliness appears as a mode of experiencing situations that are typical for a person's being lonely. The situations in which interviewees experience themselves as lonely are constitutive of their experience. Reversely, their experiencing themselves as lonely is constitutive for the further course the situation takes, as it is expressed in their ways of acting, perceiving, and experiencing in that situation and their handling the situation. Experiencing loneliness and the situations in which loneliness becomes manifest in experience are structrally interrelated. For this reason, it is misleading to try and separate 'subjective' or 'psychological' factors from 'situational' or 'objective' ones, when it comes to investigating loneliness.

On the other hand, being alone or being socially isolated are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for being lonely. Any account of loneliness regarding the answer to the question as to whether or not there are (certain) social relationships in place or whether or not a person succeeds in establishing situational understanding as a sufficient criterion for deciding the question as to whether or not a particular individual is lonely, will be incomplete. An account of loneliness that is primarily based on observable criteria seemingly renders judging a person lonely (or not) an objectifiable question, and thus may appear attractive from an empiricist point of view (e.g. for demoscopic or epidemiological purposes). It comes at the cost of omitting the evaluative dimension which is however crucial to the concept of loneliness, i.e. the question as to whether or not a particular person's social relationships sufficiently meet with the very person's own standards, needs, or desires.

Being neither reducible to individual experiences nor to facts holding about an individual, loneliness presents an interactional phenomenon. Lonelines arises from a person's becoming aware that his/her attempts to establish or enter particular social relationships and contexts fail (Buecker et al. 2021), whilst continuing to endorse the desire to succeed in doing so. Analytically, such awareness entails a three-place, reflective relation: a subject takes an evaluative stance on his/her engaging in social relationships (Seemann 2022). Loneliness presents a self-evaluative attitude, i.e. an attitude a person takes up to her/his own conduct (including experiences, doings, motivational attitudes), and conceptually stands in close vicinity with shame or pride. In the case of loneliness, the 'conduct' in question consists in one's own engaging in social relationships, which are judged satisfiable or unsatisfiable, sufficient or insufficient, of the right or the wrong kind. The standard of evaluation against which one's engaging in relationships is measured consists in the needs, desires and demands one endorses with respect to one's own social interacting. Neither of the constituents of the self-evaluative judgement nor the judgement itself need to be consciously available, or linguistically expressable for the person who experiences loneliness.

Besides this quite obvious normative element inherent in loneliness, there are two further underlying normative dimensions which come in with lonliness being a self-evaluative attitude (Schmid 2011). First, the judgement as to the discrepancy of one's actual engaging in social relation and the desired one, underlies correctness conditions. It can fail if, for instance, one is mistaken about one's own wishes or about the way in which one engages in relationships (Davidson 1982/2004). Secondly, the standard by which one's actual engaging in social relationships is evaluated, i.e. one's desire that they be such-and-such, itself underlies criteria of appropriateness (Motta 2021). As described above, it is possible that a person desires

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[14] A person can succeed in engaging in relationships without wanting or desiring to do so, as long as the person does not desire to not engage in the relationships in question (and acts accordingly). Vice versa, it is possible that a person fails to establish mutual understanding in a particular instance of social interaction without experiencing such failure as loneliness, namely if the person desires not to arrive at mutual understanding, or if the person does not desire the interaction in question to succeed. It is equally possible that the person's failure goes unnoticed by the person him-/herself, due to inattention, erroneous judgement, or self-deception.

for conceptually impossible kinds of social relationships. Further, it is possible that a person's desires for a particular kind of relationship turn out inappropriate, given the other participants' willingness and capacities to engage in the relationship in question, or given a still different standard as to what kind of conduct is appropriate or inappropriate for such a relationship. Experiencing there being a discrepancy between one's desires for engaging in social environments and one's actual engagement, according to one's own perception, shows in the person's conduct, i.e. the efforts s/he takes in trying to engage in interaction, his/her moods and feelings, which features in his/her social environment are salient to his/her perception, the aspects under which s/he observes others, and so forth.

Considering loneliness as a self-evaluative attitude underlines its social character in a still slightly different way. Not only do the constituents of its being experienced refer to the social aspects of the lonely person's situation. Moreover, the evaluative framework of the person's judgement as to the discrepancy between his/her desirable and his/her actual social embedment derives from the over-individual normative framework s/he participates in by virtue of belonging to the corresponding social environment. This normative framework provides the practices of perceiving, evaluating and directing individuals' engaging in social interaction and relationships with others. It also settles questions as to the degree in which an individual is responsible for the success of his/her social engagement, and questions as to the kind of social interaction individuals can and ought to expect as well as which kind and quantity of social relationships are deemed indispensable for individuals' social life being a good, or fulfilled, one. In one's desires and expectations concerning one's social life as well as in evaluating it, one first and foremost re-enacts the evaluative practices and conceptual schemes one has acquired by participating in a particular social environment (Schmid 2011).

Hence, the judgement as to the discrepancy between one's actual engaging in social interaction, and the way in which one ought to do so, and thus the experience of loneliness itself manifest the respective person's 'sociality', though not in terms of being its ontological contrary. The social environment a person participates in not only provides the situational conditions under which loneliness arises in individual cases, and which are constituents of its experience, but also the conceptual and evaluative framework for making judgements as to a person's loneliness, which provides for the conditions of possibility of experiencing loneliness in the first place. In experiencing loneliness, that is, a person reveals his/her being deeply embedded in a social environment—albeit not necessarily the one s/he longs for.

9 Conclusion

To sum up, loneliness consists in experiencing attempts to bring about mutual understanding with others as failing, whilst maintaining one's desire for them to succeed. The concept of loneliness emerging from my discussion shows loneliness as a complex social phenomenon. Experiences of loneliness arise in interactional contexts, and the structural features of the situation from which they arise are constitutive for the experience itself. Hence, loneliness cannot be isolated from the situational, especially the social, context in which it arises, as either, an experiential quality or observable property of the lonely person in question or an ontological condition of human beings in general. Loneliness involves a reflective relation, a person's taking up an evaluative stance towards his/her own engaging in social interaction and relationships and judging it unsatisfiable by his/her own standards.

The existential dimension of experiencing loneliness which is articulated in the seemingly contradictory statement 'I am alone, though I ought not be so' results from interpreting situational failure to arrive at mutual understanding in social interaction, be it experienced at a singular occasion or repeatedly in social encounters, as an indicator for the general impossibility of arriving at mutual understanding with others. Loneliness in this most threatening form is somewhat tragic in the literal sense of the word, viz. in that it contains a false conception on part of the characters involved which contributes to the events unfolding in such a way as to issue in some major or minor catastrophe. The misconception at issue in the existentialist rendering of loneliness is the assumption of there being a contradiction between one's being different from others, and the possibility of engaging with them in interaction, as others who are like oneself, as to develop a common viewpoint on a particular matter, if not within a larger and temporally extended intersection of social reality. This tragic course of developing is well observable in the pattern of loneliness I have earlier called emptiness (Sect. 5). A person whose experiencing loneliness is grounded in lacking a stable self-conception desparately longs for interacting with others in such a way that s/he is acknowledged as the person who s/he is, while s/he simultaneously believes this to be an impossibility. In the presence of others, s/he consequently either gives up on being her-/himself, 'wearing a mask' (#8) or pretending to be someone else, or does not even attempt to initiate or enter an interaction—thereby unwittingly iterating his/her belief that it is impossible to engage with another one whilst being oneself, different from the other.

A similar tragic is observable in the mutual relatedness of loneliness and harmful alcohol use and dependence, especially in cases in which experiencing loneliness and

(harmfully) drinking alcohol reinforce one another. As described earlier (Sect. 3), habitually or harmfully drinking alcohol reproduces loneliness by way of a vicious circle involving (self-) stigmatisation, social exclusion, unemployment, the inability to work, to interact, or to be oneself, and thus the situation which motivated drinking at first place. Reversely, if a person's self-conception entails a reference to drinking alcohol, be it in terms of a social custom or requirement, be it in terms of having acquired the social identity of a 'drinker' (Flanagan 2019), breaking with one's alcohol-involving practices and habits means breaking with one's social and personal identity (#18). Those who are taking this step can be expected to be more susceptible for experiencing loneliness in an existentially threatening dimension (Flanagan 2019; Ingram et al. 2020a). Such looping effects between alcohol dependence and loneliness can be reinforced by an environment which is likely to produce loneliness by impeding the development of stable social relationships and/or engaging in meaningful individual activities and social interaction (Alexander 2019; Buecker et al. 2021). Especially under living conditions involving frequently changing one's work or place or breaking with close relationships, habits and practices of drinking alcohol might provide for the continuity and stability of one's everyday life which otherwise cannot be accounted for (Alexander 2019). Despite the mutually reinforcing effects of loneliness and drinking alcohol it should be noted that they too are not specific for alcohol dependence. Other substances and other addictive behaviour can serve the same purposes, depending on the situational and social circumstances at least as much as on the personality traits and experiences of the individuals involved (Alexander 2019; Alfonso 2021). A detailed discussion of the relatedness of alcohol dependence and loneliness in relation to their social conditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

Taking the existential dimension of loneliness seriously requires more than considering loneliness an existential condition of human life, which some people are more likely to realise in experience than others, and more than regarding loneliness a phenomenon that concerns individual persons and their states of mind or personality. The conceptual analysis of loneliness I have suggested here, characterising loneliness as arising from taking up a self-evaluative stance towards one's own engaging in relationships, draws attention to its being entangled in situational conditions figuring as contituents of its respective instantiations. As I have shown in this paper, the same holds for the relatedness of (harmful) alcohol use and dependence and loneliness insofar as this relation is neither a conceptual nor a causal one, but entangled in a multidimensional and complex way which varies across cases just as the structure of loneliness does. A fortiori, both loneliness and its relatedness to (harmful) alcohol use and dependence

ought to be conceived from an externalist point of view. This requires focusing on their functional and interactional structure as well as the social conditions under which they arise. It would not be surprising if thus taking in an externalist perspective on loneliness and its relatedness to alcohol dependence eventually requires to understand addiction—be it substance dependence or addictive behaviour—equally as a relational and interactional phenomenon whose occurrence and manifestations are mainly influenced by the social conditions under which it arises.

Declarations

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