



A Critique of Existential Loneliness

Shaun Gallagher^{1,2}

Accepted: 8 February 2023 / Published online: 2 March 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

After a brief review of different definitions and types of loneliness I offer an analysis of the concept of existential loneliness and its philosophical background. In contrast to the interpersonal aspects of other types of loneliness, existential loneliness has been characterized as an intrapersonal default state of incommunicability or profound aloneness, part of or based on a fundamental ontological or transcendental structure in human existence. There are both conceptual and practical issues with the notion of existential loneliness, with implications for psychotherapy. I offer a critical approach, and argue that there is no good philosophical basis for this conception of existential loneliness, and that although loneliness can be existential in some respect, it typically manifests itself in interpersonal contexts, and should not be considered a fundamental ontological structure of human existence.

Keywords Existential loneliness · Being-with · Intersubjectivity · Heidegger · Sartre

In contrast to the several types of loneliness that have been identified in the psychological literature, e.g., intimate, or relational, or collective loneliness, defined in terms of interpersonal relations – types of loneliness that may be transient or treatable – the concept of existential loneliness is said to be more fundamental, pervasive and part of the very structure of being human. Existential loneliness is sometimes characterized as involving a default state of incommunicability because it is based on a fundamental ontological or transcendental structure – a profound intrinsic absence – in human existence, something that we may be inclined to hide from ourselves. Accordingly, some theorists claim that the human being is ultimately, necessarily, and forever lonely in such a way that any attempt to escape this loneliness results in self-alienation.

Despite complaints that the concept of existential loneliness is vague and unclear, and despite acknowledged difficulties in assessing/diagnosing it, this concept continues to inform a number of psychotherapeutic approaches.

According to these approaches, the point of therapy is not to eliminate existential loneliness, or to rearrange things to cover it up, but to face up to it, and to accept it. Facing up to it is said to allow for growth (e.g., Ettema, Derksen & van Leeuwen 2010).

The philosophical roots of this concept are intertwined with the existential analyses of Heidegger and Sartre, and there are debates about how existential loneliness relates to phenomenological conceptions of transcendental intersubjectivity and “being-with” (*Mitsein*), which are considered existential structures of human existence. In the developmental literature, however, concepts such as primary intersubjectivity seem to undermine the idea of existential loneliness. In this paper I clarify the terms of this debate and argue that although loneliness can be a serious clinical problem, it is not in fact a deep or pervasive existential problem.

1 Loneliness: A Quick Review

Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959), a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and a student of Kurt Goldstein, was primarily interested in clinical loneliness. She considered this condition to be incommunicable, and perhaps for that reason understudied.

✉ Shaun Gallagher
s.gallagher@memphis.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Memphis, 329 Clement Hall, Memphis, TN 38152, USA

² School of Liberal Arts, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Loneliness seems to be such a painful, frightening experience that people will do practically everything to avoid it. This avoidance seems to include a strange reluctance on the part of psychiatrists to seek scientific clarification of the subject. Thus it comes about that loneliness is one of the least satisfactorily conceptualized psychological phenomena, not even mentioned in most psychiatric textbooks. (Fromm-Reichmann 1959, 1).

Fromm-Reichmann's paper has been cited over 600 times; sometimes by works that have been cited many more times. Accordingly, measured by citations, loneliness as a topic, is no longer so lonely. Indeed, the concept of loneliness is surrounded by a family of cousin concepts – although it is not the same as solitude, social isolation, homesickness, nostalgia, self-alienation, lack of recognition, grief or depression, it may relate to or involve these things. Some of these conditions may cause loneliness, or some may be part of loneliness, constituting a specific kind of loneliness. Because of all these connecting concepts, researchers agree that it is important to start with a definition of loneliness.

In the psychological literature, one finds an often repeated 'standard' definition: "Loneliness is defined as a negative emotional state that arises when there is a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships" (Achterbergh et al. 2020, 416; Cacioppo et al. 2015; Perlman, Peplau & Goldston 1984). This definition emphasizes the cognitive-emotional nature of loneliness. Accordingly, loneliness is considered an 'internal emotional state' (Asher and Paquette 2003), although influenced by quantitative or objective characteristics of social relationships, such as frequency of social relationships not living up to some expectation (Cacioppo et al. 2009; Weiss 1973).

The task of defining loneliness is complicated by attempts to distinguish different types of loneliness (see Motta 2021 for a discussion of various definitions). Fromm-Reichmann, for example, distinguishes several types.

Culturally-determined Loneliness: what Kierkegaard called the "cut-offness and solitariness of civilized men" discussed by sociologists and social psychologists as characteristic of western culture. Fromm-Reichmann cites David Riesman's (1950) notion of the "lonely crowd." This is the type of organized loneliness that, as Hannah Arendt (1951, 461), who corresponded with Riesman, claimed, controversially, "prepares men for totalitarian domination."

Physical Loneliness: based on cultural taboos about physical contact and touching. Fromm-Reichmann rightly recommends therapies based on massage rather than alcohol consumption.

Chronic or clinical loneliness (or what she calls 'real [or severe] loneliness'): In the words of Weiss (1973): "a chronic distress without redeeming features." Chronic loneliness is distinguished from *Transient Loneliness*: experienced, for example, when you are sick and have to stay in bed; or in the context of bereavement, a change of city or social circles, or being distanced from friends, family or partners.

Cutting across this typology, Robert Weiss (1973) suggests a topological categorization that has been taken up and developed by several theorists, (Dunbar 2014; Hall 1966; Hawkey et al. 2005; Hawkey et al. 2012).

Intimate loneliness (or "emotional loneliness"), which refers to the perceived absence of a significant someone (e.g., a spouse)

Relational loneliness (or social loneliness), which refers to the perceived absence of quality friendships or family connections.

Collective loneliness (Dunbar 2014), which refers to a modification of a person's valued social identities or "active network" (e.g., group, school, team, or national identity) wherein an individual can connect to similar others at a distance in the collective space.

Cacioppo et al. (2015) characterize these distinctions as three "dimensions" related to one's attentional space: close or intimate space; social space (involving family and acquaintances); and the public space of generalized others.

Neither Fromm-Reichmann, nor the various theorists involved in mapping out different definitions and topologies of loneliness mention or describe *existential loneliness*, which Clark Moustakas (1961) defines as a default *condition* of human existence.

Loneliness is the condition of human life.... Man is ultimately and forever lonely.... I believe it is necessary for every person to recognize his loneliness, to become intensely aware that in every fibre of his being, man is alone – terribly, utterly alone. Efforts to overcome or escape the existential experience of loneliness can result only in self-alienation. (Moustakas 1961, 3).

Accordingly, such a loneliness can only have a profound effect on experience and human psychology. For example, Ben Mijuskovic associates it with a particular fear.

The fear of loneliness and the desire to avoid it constitutes the ultimate primary motivational principle in man.... The drive to escape isolation accounts for

all our passion, thought, and action. In all we think, say, and do, we are animated by a fear of loneliness. (Mijuskovic 1988, 508).

Carr and Fang (2021, 2) suggest that it motivates a type of behavior that involves a struggle for maintaining social connections.

On an ontological level, humans are inherently lonely and separate from the world, although, as social beings, they still struggle and seek to reduce this separation through meaningful human interactions.

2 Existential Loneliness, Non-Communicability and the Experience of Absence

One important point made by Fromm-Reichman involves the non-communicability of loneliness.

People who are in the grip of severe degrees of loneliness cannot talk about it; and people who have at some time in the past had such an experience can seldom do so either, for it is so frightening and uncanny in character that they try to dissociate the memory of what it was like, and even the fear of it. This frightened secretiveness and lack of communication about loneliness seems to increase its threat for the lonely ones, even in retrospect; it produces the sad conviction that nobody else has experienced or ever will sense what they are experiencing or have experienced. (1959, 6).

Although Fromm-Reichman does not call this existential loneliness, her description here comes close to how the latter is characterized. Specifically, a default incommunicability is part of that description since the experience of existential loneliness is said to involve a nonconceptual experience of nothingness (Ettema et al. 2010). An alternative explanation, however, is that silence about loneliness may be due to a cultural/normative stigma (Lau and Gruen 1992). As Morrison and Smith (2017, 11) put it: “Loneliness is a largely invisible condition which can only be exposed to others by oneself. However, admitting to being lonely is problematic because loneliness is stigmatised in many cultures. For this same reason, it often goes under-reported, remains clinically undiagnosed and is difficult to quantify.” This view is reflected in patients who do come to express their loneliness in therapeutic contexts. For example, James, a 56-year-old recovering alcoholic and ex-soldier, diagnosed with PTSD and related anxiety and depression, when asked about loneliness, says:

Lonely, sad and lonely and there’s, you know ... I feel lonely but I’ve got people that I can talk to that I don’t really want to talk to about this, about being lonely, about the feeling of being lonely.... It is something that is like a sort of stigma thing that you don’t want to talk about because you don’t want to admit it. (quoted in Sagan and Miller 2017, 9).

Beyond this (normative) stigma, loneliness, for some, may involve an inexplicable affective disruption of communication that reinforces the experience. Again, one of Sagan’s patients states: “I asked the postman something the other day, you know, just to talk ... to someone ... and my heart was beating so much, I, I can’t explain” (Sagan and Miller 2017, 9). Such experiences, and the incommunicability involved, whether due to cultural stigma or affective disorder, are typically considered part of chronic loneliness, and specifically differentiated from what most people experience. In this respect, if incommunicability is also part of existential loneliness, it is not a defining characteristic.

It is still possible that the incommunicability of existential loneliness is tied to the nonconceptual experience of nothingness or of absence, as Ettema, Derksen & van Leeuwen (2010) claim. “The feeling of EL [existential loneliness] is described as a total lack of relatedness. Although some authors on EL explicitly stress that EL is not a lack of something but just what one is... their actual descriptions of EL are also formulated in terms of absence. For example, EL is described as a feeling of ‘emptiness’, ‘timelessness’ ... and ‘nothingness’, and therefore, as having a ‘toneless quality’” (2010, 157).

The intentionality of experienced absence, however, is also found in descriptions of intimate (or emotional) loneliness, defined as an ‘affective state’ produced by the *absence* of a figure of attachment; as well as in descriptions of relational (or social) loneliness involving the *absence* of an accessible social network (Weiss 1973). One also finds characterizations of transient loneliness that involve the experienced absence of home or homeland, or familiar affordances. These various empirical cases of loneliness can involve “a deeply felt distressing experience of absence that prevents one from fully experiencing oneself” (Motta and Bortolotti 2020, 132). Moreover, experiences of absence may vary from one condition to another. In this respect, then, it is not clear that the experience of absence or a form of nothingness is a unique or ubiquitous characteristic of existential loneliness.

One place to look for help in clarifying this issue may be the descriptions offered by existential philosophers. One well-known example is Sartre’s description of not finding his friend, Pierre.

I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I arrive at the cafe a quarter of an hour late.... I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, "He is not here." Is there an intuition of Pierre's absence, or does negation indeed enter in only with judgment? At first sight it seems absurd to speak here of intuition since to be exact there could not be an intuition of nothing and since the absence of Pierre is this nothing. Popular consciousness, however, bears witness to this intuition. Do we not say, for example, "I suddenly saw that he was not there." (1956, 9).

Sartre provides an analysis that shows the primary experience is an intuitive perceptual experience of the absence that grounds further judgment. The intuition, however, is oriented to the arrangement of the café and of Pierre's not being there – which, in phenomenological terms, concern the noematic or meaning pole of intentionality. "In short, absence is defined as a mode of being of human-reality in relation to locations and places which it has itself determined by its presence" (1956, 278). The absence here is not part of the structure of the (noetic) intuition, nor does it call up some sort of affective state that resembles loneliness. For Sartre, the experience of the absence of a friend is not necessarily characterized as a form of loneliness even if it is an experience of absence. I can experience the absence of Pierre without experiencing loneliness at all. Just as social isolation does not entail loneliness, neither does the perception of Pierre's absence.

On the one hand, Sartre suggests that the absence that we experience is "an abrupt break in continuity ... an original and irreducible event." In that sense, it does not fit the description of an existential structure that pervades our existence. On the other hand, however, Sartre suggests that the experience of absence depends on an existential condition that characterizes human existence. "The necessary condition for our saying not [or experiencing absence] is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunts being" (1956, 11). For Sartre, this necessary condition is the negative or nothingness of consciousness, which may spark an experience of *Angst*, even if it does not necessarily involve an experience of loneliness. On this existential analysis of the experience of absence, we find, not a necessary loneliness that, according to accounts of existential loneliness, should be pervasive, but, at best, or at worst, the occasion to experience a form of *Angst*. Even when Sartre discusses death, specifically the death of Pierre, there is no mention of loneliness (1956, 112).

The connection between existential loneliness and death is clearly made by Ettema, Derksen & van Leeuwen (2010). "EL is mostly experienced in life-threatening situations because it is in the confrontation with death that one is most

aware of one's own fundamental aloneness. This loneliness can be nullified neither by the presence of others nor by an adequate dealing with feelings—the isolation of having to die alone remains" (2010, 142). In that case, perhaps, Heidegger would be more relevant than Sartre.

It is Heidegger who clearly states the connection between a fundamental aloneness and being-toward-death. We can try to understand this in terms of an existential structure that Heidegger calls *Mitsein* – being-with. Being-with is a primary existential characteristic of human existence (*Dasein*), 'equiprimordial' or co-original with Being-in-the world (1962, 149/114; also 153/117; 1 1988, 238). As Heidegger notes (and as Sartre complains [1956, 248]), being-with does not depend on any actual encounter with others. Heidegger emphasizes that being-with as an originary existential structure of *Dasein* actually has nothing to do the fact that there may be other people in the world. The fact that others are in the world only has significance because *Dasein* is being-with, not the other way around. Moreover, "only as being-with can *Dasein* be alone" (1988, 238). Being-with as such does not depend on there being others; *Dasein* "is far from becoming being-with because an other turns up in fact" (239). Being-with is rather something that is built into *Dasein*'s structure.

What does Heidegger say about existential loneliness? He does not use the term 'loneliness' or 'aloneness' in *Being and Time*. He does use the phrase 'being-alone'. In discussing being-alone, however, he makes it clear that, as we have noted, the ontological-existential characteristic of being-with is not dependent on any ontic or empirical experience of the other. For the latter he uses the term 'Dasein-with' – an encounter with others who are within-the world (1962, 156). Being-alone, however, "is Being-with in the world. The Other can be missing only *in* and *for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with..." For Heidegger, then, this existential feature of being-with is a necessary condition for the experience of being-alone – only because *Dasein* is *Mitsein* can *Dasein* experience being-alone. As Mike Wheeler (2020) puts it: "Being-with is thus the a priori transcendental condition for loneliness." If we were not set up as being-with, then the not-being-with that seemingly characterizes loneliness (even in cases where there are too many people around) would not be possible (1962, 157). Moreover, only because of this *Mitsein* structure, *Dasein* experiences a fundamental aloneness in being-toward-death. The possibility of death individuates; no other can substitute for my death.

As many commentators have pointed out, Heidegger leaves these concepts undeveloped – specifically the concepts of being-with, *Dasein*-with, and being-alone (Binswanger 1962; Gadamer 2004; Gallagher and Jacobson 2012; Löwith 1928; Nancy 2008; Pöggeler 1989);

Tugendhat 1986). In this regard it is not clear that Heidegger would ultimately endorse the notion of existential loneliness as it has been defined by Ettema, Derksen, van Leeuwen, Mijuskovic or Moustakas. At best, it seems to be a deficient mode of being-with. As such, however, it would not be an inescapable mode of existence.

3 A Critique of Existential Loneliness

I mentioned that the concept of existential loneliness is considered to be vague and unclear (Ettema et al. 2010; Bolmsjö et al. 2019; Maes et al. 2022); it is sometimes confused with meaning of life issues,¹ and there are difficulties in assessing/diagnosing it (van Tilburg 2021). Despite these issues, the concept of existential loneliness accordingly, he rejects Heidegger's continues to inform a number of psychotherapeutic approaches (Applebaum 1978; Carter 2000; Lindnauer 1970; May and Yalom 2000; Mayers and Svartberg 2001; Nyström et al. 2002; Nyström 2006; Olofsson et al. 2021; Razban et al. 2022). According to these approaches, therapy is not meant to eliminate existential loneliness, but to face up to it. Whereas social and emotional loneliness can be addressed by improving one's network of relationships, there is no cure for existential loneliness (Mayers and Svartberg 2001). In some cases, psychotherapy proceeds by "accepting and understanding one's existential emptiness, giving up trying to solve it by one's own powers, and by permitting existential completeness to come" (Park 2006).

To the extent that theorists of existential loneliness appeal to something like the underdeveloped analysis found in Heidegger, the concept will likely continue to remain vague and unclear. More than this, however, psychotherapists may encounter important limitations in regard to practical application. Sartre makes this clear in his criticism of Heidegger. Speaking of the concept of *Mitsein*, Sartre comments:

¹ For example, some authors regard existential loneliness to be a permanent condition (e.g., Moustakas 1961); others consider it a temporary state that one can work through, allowing for growth or leading to a better life (Applebaum 1978; Ettema, Derksen & van Leeuwen 2010). Olofsson et al. (2021, 1184) summarize a number of characterizations: "There is no clear definition of existential loneliness, but it can be understood as an immediate awareness of being fundamentally separated from other people and from the universe, primarily through experiencing oneself as mortal. Existential loneliness can also be described as a deeper sense of loneliness. In critical situations in which a previously envisioned future and one's basic security come under threat existential well-being may be negatively impacted and feelings of meaninglessness [sic]. From an existential point of view, this awakening triggers a crisis reaction. Besides being described as the ultimate aloneness, existential loneliness can also be seen as a part of being human that cannot be avoided during the course of life. However, existential loneliness can also be a peaceful positive experience if one chooses freely between a social network and solitude and lead to personal growth."

the ontological co-existence which appears as the structure of "being-in-the-world" can in no way serve as a foundation to an ontic being-with, such as, for example, the co-existence which appears in my friendship with Pierre.... In fact it would be necessary to show that "being-with-Pierre" ... is a structure constitutive of my concrete-being. But this is impossible from the point of view which Heidegger has adopted. The Other in the relation "with," taken on the ontological level, can not in fact be concretely determined ...; it is an abstract term... and it does not contain the power of becoming *that* Other-Pierre.... Thus the relation of the *Mitsein* can be of absolutely no use to us in resolving the psychological, concrete problem of the recognition of the Other. (1956, 248).

One might try to ignore this criticism by taking Sartre in a different direction, as Mijuskovic (2012) does in his analysis of existential loneliness. On this account, loneliness is not a disruption or deficient mode of *Mitsein*, but rather is itself a fundamental ontological structure (a transcendental loneliness) – a profound intrinsic absence in human existence that we are inclined to hide from ourselves. Mijuskovic favors a Cartesian interpretation of Sartre as supportive of existential loneliness. "With Sartre I would agree that man is condemned not only to freedom but to loneliness as well" (Mijuskovic 2012, 124). Accordingly, he rejects Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein*, and thinks R.D. Laing contradicts himself since he endorses both the Heideggerian view, and the Cartesian-Sartrean view. The association between being-with and existential loneliness, however, can be found in other theorists, e.g., John McGraw (1995): "Being with others is man's primary mode of being. This makes loneliness metaphysical" (Ettema et al. 2010, 147).

I think Mijuskovic is correct that you cannot have it both ways, i.e., posit both an a priori transcendental condition of being-with, which specifies a deep interpersonal structure to human existence, and a transcendental existential loneliness that specifies the opposite, and treat these as in some way equiprimordial. It seems a theoretical contradiction, in the phenomenological-existential realm, to say that *Mitsein* is a basic existential characteristic – a constitutive aspect of human existence – and at the same time insist that loneliness has the same status. At best, one could say, as Heidegger does, that one is derivative (or a deficient mode), or, setting aside Sartre's skepticism, that an existential/transcendental/ontological characteristic like *Mitsein* is the condition for an empirical/psychological/ontic loneliness. Furthermore, however, if one tries to make existential loneliness an existential or transcendental characteristic, a practical/empirical contradiction follows: all evidence points to a profound sociality characterizing most of human life, from the beginning

(reflected in the developmental concept of primary intersubjectivity) to the end of life (when we are faced with leaving others behind); all evidence is that our existence involves being with others. Even Heidegger's well-known contention that *Dasein* tends towards inauthenticity, the *das Man* mode of being lost in the crowd, seems to speak against existential loneliness. With some exceptions, we are, for most of our life, busy being with others. This doesn't make loneliness impossible, but challenges the idea that instances of loneliness are existential in the proper sense. This naturally raises the question: is there such a thing as existential loneliness?

I want to acknowledge that how one answers that question may depend on one's conception of what I am calling the profound sociality of human existence, and one's understanding of some of the developmental issues, starting at birth. Here the notion of primary intersubjectivity is relevant. I won't attempt to lay out the complete argument for primary intersubjectivity, a concept that characterizes human existence as interactively intersubjective from birth, with roots in our genetic/biological nature. A short summary, however, may be helpful. The notion is drawn from developmental studies by Colwyn Trevarthen (1979), Peter Hobson (2002), Vasu Reddy (2008) and others, which show that from birth, infants have sensory-motor capacities, manifested at the level of action and perceptual experience, that bring them into relation with others and allow them to interact with their caregivers. From infancy onward we are typically attuned to other persons, and specifically to their bodily movements, gestures, facial expressions, eye direction, vocal intonation, etc. and have a sense of what they intend and what they feel; we respond with our own bodily movements, gestures, facial expressions, gaze, etc. Meaningful human interaction is already at work in early infancy in embodied practices that constitute our primary access for understanding others, and this is something that continues throughout the life span.

For example, infants are able to sense that certain kinds of entities in the environment are agents like themselves, in contrast to inanimate objects (Legerstee 2005; Johnson 2000). From birth they are capable of perceiving and responding to facial gestures presented by another, in a way that implies a distinction between self and non-self (Bermúdez 1996; Gallagher and Meltzoff 1996). This contrasts with a psychoanalytic view of a postulated experiential fusion or indifferentiation between infant and other at the beginning of life (Winnicott 1989) – the initial motivation for a struggle to differentiate or individuate oneself, which is then said to reveal one's existential loneliness (Applebaum 1978).

Primary intersubjectivity can be specified in more detail. For example, at 2 months of age infants are already tracking the other person's head movements and gaze direction (Baron-Cohen 1995; Maurer and Barrera 1981). At this age,

second-person interaction is evidenced by the timing and emotional response of infants' behaviors. They “vocalize and gesture in a way that [is affectively and temporally] ‘tuned’ to the vocalizations and gestures of the other person” (Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997, 131). At 5–7 months infants are able to detect correspondences between visual and auditory information that specify the expression of emotions (Hobson 2002). At 6 months they start to perceive grasping as goal directed, and at 10–11 months they are able to parse continuous actions according to intentional boundaries (Baldwin and Baird 2001). Infants start to perceive various movements of the head, the mouth, the hands, and more general body movements as meaningful, goal-directed movements (Senju, Johnson & Csibra 2006).

Whether one accepts a strong conception of primary intersubjectivity as an interaction between self and other, or in contrast, a strong conception of experiential fusion from which one must struggle to free oneself, the existential situation is not that we are thrown into the world as a lonely individual. From the start, one experiences life interacting with or united with others. Moreover, even in the process of individuating ourselves, we are doing so specifically in our interpersonal relations. On this view, loneliness, rather than a deep structure of our existence, is a modification or interruption of our deep intersubjective relational existence.

4 Loneliness as Interpersonal and Existential

The idea that everyone dies alone is consistent with Heidegger's individuating anxiety in the face of death; this is the idea that the existential loneliness “that we experience in the awareness of our own finitude cannot be relieved by the presence of others;” or the idea that “we remain fundamentally alone in the anticipation of our death” (Ettema et al. 2010; Mayers et al. 2002).² On this view, as Jaspers suggests, I should confront death as a “challenge, rather, to live and to test my life in view of death” (1970, 195). It takes courage, to individually confront death in “an attitude that lets me view death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself” (199). My argument is not that we should adopt this Heideggerian view. Still, we may think that, rather than looking at the beginning of life, one should start with a consideration of the loneliness involved in dying, and work back from that. In this regard, rather than focusing on one's own dying, loneliness is typically experienced as the result of the dying of a loved one. That kind of loneliness is experienced with the intensity that is usually attributed to

² An extreme version of this view is that existential loneliness is strictly intrapersonal, and so pervasive that the love and friendship we experience throughout life create the illusion that we are not alone (Razban et al. 2022, 218; Yalom 1980).

existential loneliness, if there is such a thing. Karl Jaspers makes this clear.

The death of the closest, most beloved persons ... is the deepest incision in phenomenal life. We stay alone when we must leave them alone at the last moment when we cannot follow. Nothing is reversible; it is the end for all time. The dying cannot be addressed anymore; everyone dies alone. The loneliness at the point of death seems total, for the dying as well as for the one left behind. The phenomenon of being together as long as there is consciousness, this sorrow of parting, is the last, helpless expression of communication. (1970, 194)

Consider a different view, however. Werner Marx (1987) suggests that encountering the possibility of my own death, and the death of others, can be an intensively intersubjective experience since we all share mortality – we are all in the same boat in this regard; we all share in being-towards-death (both in terms of our personal demise, as well as the possibility of environmental disaster, or the possibility of nuclear holocaust). For Marx, the proper attunement towards death constitutes a “healing force” that overcomes the unsettling *Angst* associated with death. The movement from the unsettling character of death to the healing power of our experienced mortality involves attaining an attunement towards others, a “relational authenticity” (Gallagher, Morgan & Rokotnitz 2018), a way of “being-together-with-one-another” rather than setting them aside, or leaving them behind (Marx 1987, 53). Attaining the proper relationship to death must be thought of in terms of a gift, or an event that happens to all of us (57, 114–115).³

I think the evidence in favor of Marx’s view (and against the very concept of existential loneliness) just is the experience of profound interpersonal loneliness in the case of losing a loved one, or the experience of loneliness that may be imposed by environmental, social or cultural arrangements – such phenomena that can lead to different forms of chronic or transient loneliness.

This view is consistent with a suggestion made by Sköld (2020, 2021), that instead of distinguishing between interpersonal loneliness (of different varieties, such as emotional, social, etc.) and existential loneliness, we should understand existential aspects in an interpersonal light, and interpersonal aspects in an existential light. Loneliness can be deeply problematic and transformative; we can even recognize it as having existential significance, without taking it to be rooted in a deep inescapable transcendental structure.

³ Similar conceptions can be found in thinkers such as Fichte or Ricoeur in specific reference to the concept of intersubjective recognition (see Gallagher 2020).

We can acknowledge that all interpersonal loneliness is existential to the extent that it transforms my way of being-in-the-world – either robbing me of meaning, or providing me with more meaning.

If we endorse the idea of an empirical-developmental version of interpersonal existence, we can understand primary intersubjectivity as a set of dynamical intersubjective processes that make us who we are. Then, loneliness, rather than a deep structure of our existence, can be viewed as an experience that one has when there is a deficiency or disruption in our possibilities for intersubjective interactions, caused by a variety of things, including attachment problems in childhood, loss of a loved one, disruptive social/cultural practices or arrangements, and so on. This reframing makes a practical difference in therapeutic contexts. On this view, and in contrast to views reflected in some of the theorists cited earlier (e.g., Mayers & Svartberg 2001; Park 2006), loneliness is not an existential or default state, and therapy should not be simply a form of accepting it. The implication of such a reframing in a therapeutic setting is to reject adopting an attitude of resignation, of just facing up to an inescapable *Angst*, and to embrace the possibility of transforming it into an openness, and an appreciation of our life with others, or, in the context of transitioning from grief, what Merleau-Ponty described as a “quiet interest in some bright object” (2012, 86). This is not to downplay what is often the severe effect of loneliness, but to recognize and appreciate the deep significance of our shared finitude.

5 Conclusion

In contrast to interpersonal aspects of other types of loneliness, existential loneliness has been characterized as an intrapersonal default state of incommunicability or profound aloneness, part of a fundamental ontological or transcendental structure in human existence. After providing some sense of its philosophical background, I’ve argued that there is no good philosophical basis for this conception of existential loneliness, that there are both conceptual and practical issues connected with it, and that this has some implications for psychotherapy. Although loneliness can be existential in some respect, it typically manifests itself in interpersonal contexts, and should not be considered an inescapable ontological structure of human existence. More positively, we should think of loneliness as a modification of our deep-rooted intersubjective existence, and as something that can be addressed in therapeutic contexts. Best practices in such contexts may depend on further research to understand the affective experiential differences that result from different causal factors disruptive of intersubjective existence.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflict of Interest No conflict of interest.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Achterbergh L, Pitman A, Birken M, Pearce E, Sno H, Johnson S (2020) The experience of loneliness among young people with depression: a qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature. *BMC Psychiatry* 20(1):1–23
- Applebaum F (1978) Loneliness: a taxonomy and psychodynamic view. *Clin Soc Work J* 6(1):13–20
- Arendt H (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt, New York
- Asher SR, Paquette JA (2003) Loneliness and peer relations in childhood. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 12(3):75–78
- Baldwin DA, Baird JA (2001) Discerning intentions in dynamic human action. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 5(4):171–178
- Baron-Cohen S (1995) *Mindblindness: an essay on autism and theory of mind*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA
- Bermúdez JL (1996) The moral significance of birth. *Ethics* 106(2):378–403
- Binswanger L (1962) *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins*
- Bolmsjö I, Tengland PA, Rängård M (2019) Existential loneliness: an attempt at an analysis of the concept and the phenomenon. *Nurs Ethics* 26(5):1310–1325
- Cacioppo JT, Fowler JH, Christakis NA (2009) Alone in the crowd: the structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 97(6):977
- Cacioppo S, Grippo AJ, London S, Goossens L, Cacioppo JT (2015) Loneliness: clinical import and interventions. *Perspect Psychol Sci* 10(2):238–249
- Carr S, Fang C (2021) A gradual separation from the world: a qualitative exploration of existential loneliness in old age. *Ageing Soc* 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21001252>
- Carter MA (2000) Abiding loneliness: an existential perspective on loneliness. *Second Opinion*3. <http://www.parkridgecenter.org/Page437.html>
- Dunbar RIM (2014) The social brain: psychological underpinnings and implications for the structure of organizations. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 23:109–114
- Ettema EJ, Derksen LD, van Leeuwen E (2010) Existential loneliness and end-of-life care: a systematic review. *Theor Med Bioeth* 31(2):141–169
- Fromm Reichmann F (1959) Loneliness, *Psychiatry*, 22:1, 1–15, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1959.11023153>
- Gadamer H-G (2004) *A Century in Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*. New York:Continuum
- Gallagher S (2020) *Action and interaction*. Oxford University Press
- Gallagher S, Jacobson R (2012) Heidegger and social cognition. In: Kiverstein J, Wheeler M (eds) *Heidegger and Cognitive Science* (213–45). Palgrave-Macmillan, London
- Gallagher S, Meltzoff A (1996) The earliest sense of self and others: Merleau-Ponty and recent developmental studies. *Philosophical Psychol* 9(2):213–236
- Gallagher S, Morgan B, Rokotnitz N (2018) Relational authenticity. In: Flanagan O, Caruso G (eds) *Neuroexistentialism: meaning, Morals, and purpose in the age of Neuroscience*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 126–145. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190460723.003.0008>
- Gopnik A, Meltzoff AN (1997) *Words, thoughts and theories*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA
- Hall ET (1966) *The hidden dimension*. Doubleday, Garden City, NY
- Hawley LC, Browne MW, Cacioppo JT (2005) How can I connect with thee? Let me count the ways. *Psychol Sci* 16:798–804
- Hawley LC, Gu Y, Luo YJ, Cacioppo JT (2012) The mental representation of social connections: Generalizability extended to Beijing adults. *PLoS ONE*, 7(9): e44065
- Heidegger M (1988) *The basic problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter. Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- Heidegger M, Macquarrie J, Robinson E (1962) *New York:Harper & Row*
- Hobson P (2002) *The cradle of Thought*. Macmillan, London
- Jaspers K (1970) *General Psychopathology*, trans. J. Hoening and Marian Hamilton. Johns Hopkins, Baltimore
- Johnson SC (2000) The recognition of mentalistic agents in infancy. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 4(1):22–28
- Lau S, Gruen GE (1992) The social stigma of loneliness: Effect of target person's and perceiver's sex. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 18(2):182–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167292182009>
- Legerstee M (2005) *Infants' sense of people: precursors to a theory of mind*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Lindenauer GG (1970) Loneliness. *J Emotional Educ* 10(3):87–100
- Löwith K (1928) *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*. In K. Stichweh (ed.), *Sämtliche Schriften*, Vol. 1. (9–197). Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1981
- Maes M, Qualter P, Lodder GM, Mund M (2022) How (not) to measure loneliness: a review of the eight most commonly used scales. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 19(17):10816
- Marx W (1987) *Is there a measure on Earth? Foundations for a Non-metaphysical Ethics*, trans. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, T. J. Nenon and R. Lilly
- Maurer D, Barrera ME (1981) Infants' perception of natural and distorted arrangements of a schematic face. *Child Dev* 52(1):196–202
- Mayers AM, Khoo S-T, Svartberg M (2002) The existential loneliness questionnaire: background, development, and preliminary findings. *J Clin Psychol* 58(9):1183–1193
- Mayers AM, Naples NA, Nilsen RD (2005) Existential issues and coping: a qualitative study of low-income women with HIV. *Psychol Health* 20(1):93–113
- Mayers AM, Svartberg M (2001) Existential loneliness: a review of the concept, its psychosocial precipitants and psychotherapeutic implications for HIV-infected women. *Br J Med Psychol* 74(4):539–553. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000711201161082>
- May R, Yalom I (2000) Existential psychotherapy. In: Corsini RJ, Wedding D (eds) *Current psychotherapies*, 6th edn. Wadsworth / Thomson Learning, Belmont, pp 273–302
- McGraw JG (1995) Loneliness, its nature and forms: an existential perspective. *Man and World* 28(1):43–64
- Merleau-Ponty M (2012) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. D. A. Landes. Routledge, London

- Mijuskovic B (1988) Loneliness and adolescent alcoholism. *Adolescence* 23(91):503–516
- Mijuskovic BL (2012) Loneliness in philosophy, psychology, and literature. iUniverse
- Morrison P, Smith R (2017) Loneliness. An overview. In: Sagan OM, Miller E (eds) *Narratives of loneliness: multidisciplinary perspectives from the 21st Century*. Routledge, Oxfordshire, pp 11–25
- Motta V (2021) Key concept: loneliness. *Philos Psychiatry Psychol* 28(1):71–81
- Motta V, Bortolotti L (2020) Solitude as a positive experience: empowerment and agency. *Metodo* 8:119–147
- Moustakas C (1961) *Loneliness*. Prentiss Hall, New York
- Nancy JL (2008) The being-with of being-there. *Cont Philos Rev* 41(1):1–15
- Nyström M (2006) Aphasia—an existential loneliness: a study on the loss of the world of symbols. *Int J Qualitative Stud Health Well-being* 1:38–49
- Nyström M, Dahlberg K, Segesten K (2002) The enigma of severe mental illness: a swedish perspective. *Issues Ment Health Nurs* 23:121–134
- Olofsson J, Rångård M, Sjögren-Forss K, Bramhagen AC (2021) Older migrants' experience of existential loneliness. *Nursing Ethics*, 0969733021994167
- Park JL (2006) *Our existential predicament: loneliness, Depression, anxiety, & death*, 5th edn. Existential Books, Minneapolis
- Perlman D, Peplau LA, Goldston SE (1984) Loneliness research: a survey of empirical findings. Preventing the harmful consequences of severe and persistent loneliness, 13–46
- Pöggeler O (1989) Martin Heidegger's path of being, trans. D. Magurshak and S. Barber. Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ
- Razban F, Mehdipour-Rabori R, Rayyani M, Mangolian Shahrabaki P (2022) Meeting death and embracing existential loneliness: a cancer patient's experience of being the sole author of his life. *Death Stud* 46(1):208–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1725932>
- Reddy V (2008) *How infants Know minds*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
- Riesman D (1950) *The lonely crowd: a study of the changing american Character*. Yale University Press, New Haven & London
- Sagan O, Miller E (eds) (2017) *Narratives of loneliness: multidisciplinary perspectives from the 21st Century*. Routledge, Oxfordshire
- Sartre J-P (1956) *Being and nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes. Philosophical Library, New York
- Senju A, Johnson MH, Csibra G (2006) The development and neural basis of referential gaze perception. *Soc Neurosci* 1(3–4):220–234
- Sköld AB (2020) Om lykkens momentanitet og relationalitet [On the instantaneousness and relationality of happiness]. *Kampen om lykken: perspektiver, potentialer og problemer*. Klim, Århus
- Sköld AB (2021) *Relationality and finitude: A social ontology of grief*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag, Aalborg Universitet. Det Humanistiske Fakultet. Ph.D.-Serien <https://doi.org/10.54337/aau443504727>
- Trevarthen C (1979) Communication and cooperation in early infancy: a description of primary intersubjectivity. In: Bullowa M (ed) *Before Speech: the beginning of Interpersonal Communication*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Tugendhat E, Stern P (1986) Cambridge, MA:MIT Press
- van Tilburg TG (2021) Social, emotional and existential loneliness: a test of the multidimensional concept. *Gerontologist* 61(7):e335–e344
- Weiss RS (1973) The study of loneliness. In: Weiss RS (ed) *Loneliness: the experience of emotional and social isolation*. MIT Press, p 8–29
- Wheeler M (2020) Martin Heidegger. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/heidegger/>
- Winnicott D (1989) *Playing and reality*. Routledge, London
- Yalom ID (1980) *Existential psychotherapy*, vol 1. Basic Books, New York

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.