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Towards the geographies of loneliness: interpreting the spaces of loneliness in farming contexts

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Abstract

Loneliness is a ‘silent epidemic’, challenging people’s emotional and ontological sense of being in the world. Whilst loneliness has been the focus of medical and psychological research, often being synonymous with discourses of mental ill health, trauma and relationship breakdowns, it has remained under-theorised from a geographical perspective. In offering a critical engagement of how and where loneliness exists geographically, this paper identifies three key spatial dimensions that Geographers can proceed from. First, that loneliness is experienced relationally ‘in place’ through everyday practice and behaviour. Second, that loneliness has the capacity to infiltrate felt socio-emotional relationships and interactions. Third, that loneliness is multi-scalar, affecting bodies, families, friendships, workplaces, neighbourhoods and communities in diverse and intersecting ways. Focusing on farming and farm workers (a group recently referred to in the popular press as potentially facing isolation and loneliness) we draw on interviews with young UK farmers to examine how loneliness can be expressed through labour and routine, how farming loneliness becomes entrenched in the spaces of farming practice and habitus and the relational (and contested) responsibilities of farming communities in identifying, supporting and mediating problem loneliness in increasingly solitary contexts.

Keywords

Loneliness, Farming, Mental health, Emotional geographies, Affect

Introduction

Loneliness is one of the defining conditions of twenty-first century society and is characterised as a ‘silent epidemic’ that has genuine implications for physical and mental health (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2017). The World Health Organisation (2021)

considers loneliness a key contributor – alongside poor mental and physical ill health – towards reduced well-being, cognitive function and independence; and increased pressure upon allied health and social care services. In England alone, 5% of adults reported feeling lonely 'often' or 'always' in 2016 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2018), with this figure increasing to 7.2% (3.2 million) in 2020 (ONS, 2021). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated loneliness in the UK with 24% (one in four) of adults reporting feelings of loneliness during the second national lockdown in November 2020 (Mental Health Foundation [MHF], 2021). Evidence suggests that the ill-effects of loneliness – particularly problem loneliness – have severe negative consequences for current national economies and allied support services, as well as the potential for long(er)-term economic and social impacts upon employment, health and policy resources in the future if left unchecked (ONS, 2021). Hence, loneliness is framed as a significant problem for wider society that warrants deeper critical investigation. Given that loneliness may affect anyone, anywhere and at any time, it is a global concern, both in terms of scale and its indiscriminate nature. Yet, as a condition, loneliness is intangible – something that is experienced and felt but, through its invisibility, is rendered difficult to manage and tackle – particularly as loneliness takes many guises and affects a broad range of people at different stages of their life-course and through multiple contexts (Franklin et al., 2019).

Our interest in loneliness stems from its under-theorisation outside of medical and psychological spheres – particularly in Geography. Loneliness is often synonymous with discourses of mental ill health, trauma and relationship breakdown (Muir & McGrath, 2018) and frequently couched in terms of deficit – of not having the right, or enough, social connections; lacking a spouse, partner or family; or simply the absence of propinquity with others. This last point is inherently geographical – inferring those who experience loneliness to be physically, socially and/or emotionally separate, distanced or isolated from those who

are considered ‘not lonely’. Geography’s lack of significant and critical engagement with loneliness is surprising given its apparent spatialities (Buecker et al., 2021). In providing one of the first opportunities to explore the spatial characteristics of loneliness, we identify three key spatial dimensions that Geographers can proceed from. First, that loneliness is experienced ‘in place’ through everyday practice and behaviour. Second, that it has the capacity to infiltrate felt socio-emotional relationships and interactions. Third, that loneliness is multi-scalar, affecting bodies, families, friendships, workplaces, neighbourhoods and communities in diverse and intersecting ways. We therefore seek to understand how these spatial characteristics of loneliness overlap with perceptions and experiences of physical and social isolation and well-being.

To examine these dimensions of loneliness, we use agriculture as our empirical context. This paper draws from interviews with young UK farmers about their experiences and perceptions of the pressures of contemporary agricultural life. In these farmers’ accounts, loneliness emerged as a prominent theme and intersected with many aspects of everyday farming life and practice. This has prompted three research questions:

1. How are the emotional and affective characteristics of loneliness perceived, experienced and felt by farmers?
2. Where is farming loneliness experienced and articulated through the spaces and activities of the farm?
3. What support networks are available to farming communities and how are these received and managed?

Following an examination on the extant literature concerning loneliness as a social and cultural condition and a critical reflection on the taxonomies of loneliness in social research, we outline our methodological approach and structure our analysis and discussion in line with

the three questions above. First, we examine how loneliness is felt and experienced through labour and routine. Second, we discuss loneliness as situated in the spaces of farming practice. Third, we explore the relationalities – both in terms of the stigma of loneliness and the responsibilities of farming communities in identifying, supporting and mediating problem loneliness. Finally, we conclude by making a case for recognising the geographies of loneliness as an important social and cultural phenomenon.

Loneliness as a social condition

Loneliness is primarily a social condition driven by a motivation to increase the quantity and quality of one's social connections (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). For example, changing social relationships and connections with technology have arguably increased weaker-ties with large networks of people (e.g. through social media) whilst engagements with(in) physically-proximate and intimate situations have decreased (Franklin, 2009). This trend has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Miller, 2020), with isolation and loneliness experienced globally. Notwithstanding this, while COVID-19 restrictions have amplified concerns over the problem of loneliness, particularly with regard to supporting mental health and anxiety, loneliness has both negative and positive characteristics, particularly when distinguishing being lonely from being alone (Houghton et al., 2017) and the vulnerabilities associated with being lonely *whilst* being alone (Goossens et al., 2009).

More broadly, loneliness characteristically operates in individualised ways that encapsulates a person's subjective state of being relative to their perceptions, experiences and evaluations of their circumstances, communication and interactions with others and their environment (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Loneliness is therefore highly relational, containing opportunities for solitude, reflection and escape, while simultaneously compounding fears and anxieties. Moreover, loneliness is often used as an antonym for more affirmative and desirable

emotional traits, representing the counterpoint to belonging and connection, but also to more psychological states of solitude (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Yet, what drives loneliness? Media, policy and academic discourses often align loneliness with mental ill health, using tropes of ‘spirals’, ‘circles’ and ‘spectrums’ by way of inferring causality. However, it is unclear whether loneliness results in mental ill health or if mental ill health produces the conditions for loneliness (Gallardo, Martín-Albo and Barrasa, 2018). Hence, while we discuss loneliness in relation to mental and physical health and well-being, we intentionally avoid assuming causality between them, instead focusing on the socio-emotional and affective characteristics of loneliness that influence, and are influenced by, everyday life and how these manifest through processes of care and support.

Resisting a taxonomy of loneliness?

In theorising loneliness, the 1960s and 70s saw multiple quantitative examinations of loneliness which mirrored concerns over unstable social connections, community breakdown, and the erosion of core family values associated with deindustrialisation, globalisation and increased consumerism (Franklin, 2009). Robert Weiss’ (1973) work was key in moving beyond uni-dimensional constructs of loneliness to examine, interpret and understand its complex psychological features. Weiss (1973) devised a taxonomy that divided loneliness into two strands: social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Social loneliness inferred a person’s deficiencies in wider social networks of friends and associates, and was positioned as prevalent in mid-twentieth century society through increased geographical mobility. Emotional loneliness suggested a more embodied process, defined as not having a significant emotional connection with at least one other person which was most commonly associated with relationship breakdowns and could manifest as loss, guilt and frustration. Hence, those experiencing emotional loneliness were thought to lack social intimacy in their lives.

While this taxonomy provides opportunities to examine the perceived causes of loneliness, its rigidity opens up important critical questions when analysing contemporary experiences of loneliness. How, for example, does Weiss' framework explain the emotional loneliness experienced by an individual in a spousal/familial relationship? Moreover, how is loneliness explained for those with seemingly full social lives? While some of these issues may be considered as part of the twenty-first century disposition for individualisation and introspection, we see merit in moving beyond Weiss' theory. This is partly to recognise nuance in the anticipated or chance experiences associated with loneliness, but more intentionally to emphasise the difficulty, and unhelpfulness, of attempting to determine, or characterise loneliness – that is, effectively, to put loneliness 'in a box'. Moving beyond Weiss' tangible rendering of loneliness therefore helps recognise the messy emotions and affects that produce loneliness in many different ways.

In developing a new approach to understanding the geographies of loneliness we proceed from Franklin's more subjective interpretations of loneliness that renders it necessarily opaque, partial and adaptable (Franklin, 2009). In contrast to Weiss (1973), Franklin (2009, p. 344, emphasis in original) argues that attempts to distil loneliness down into a set of causal variables misses the important emotional and affective characteristics of loneliness that are felt individually by people:

> Loneliness can be grasped as the "feeling" or the emotional experience of those without or denied the experience of the bond, or specific prior bonds. It can therefore arise and persist "inside" "contemporary partnerships" as much as when they are cancelled.

We synthesise this thinking with work on emotional and affective geographies (Davidson, Bondi and Smith, 2005; Thien, 2005) in order to broaden Weiss' socio-emotional

characteristics qualitatively and thematically, and to enable a recognition of how the subjective and intersubjective emotional and affective qualities of loneliness are woven through people-place relations. Understanding loneliness as existing within a framework of emotional geographies allows us to focus on the subjective, circulatory and relational dimensions of everyday loneliness in ways that draw attention to the complexities associated with intimacy and proximity (Pile, 2010). In doing so we allow more subjective nuance of how, and where, loneliness is relationally experienced, felt, understood and articulated to emerge.

Farming loneliness

In this paper, we use the UK agricultural industry as an empirical context through which to investigate the geographies of loneliness. We observe farming loneliness as a critical conceptual lens through which to understand loneliness as a broader, and complex, social and geographical phenomena. Geographers have made important inroads on a variety of rural health-related issues, including the spatial implications for rural mental health (Parr, Philo & Burns, 2004), places of rural care and support (Kelly & Yarwood, 2018), emotional well-being in rural communities (Christensen, Hockey & James, 1997) and rural stigma and social exclusion (Watkins & Jacoby, 2007). Yet loneliness among farmers and farming communities is relatively under-reported. Rural scholars (e.g. McHugh-Power, 2017; Burholt & Scharf, 2014) argue for a more nuanced understanding of the barriers to social participation within rural communities which, when tackled, might have positive outcomes for loneliness. As our analysis will attest to, the weakening of rural services and communities may mean that rural and agricultural spaces contain the capacity to socially isolate residents and embed problem loneliness.

Recent media attention has been paid to loneliness amongst farming communities as a ‘key risk factor’, suggesting that a combination of financial issues, Brexit uncertainty, the perceived ‘anti-meat agenda’ and the effects of climate change are compounding a sense of isolation and loneliness among farmers (Maye et al., 2018). Our investigation concentrates on the context of farming not because we infer farmers to be lonely people, or farms to be lonely places. Instead, we seek to examine the social, cultural and emotional contexts in which loneliness manifests within the agricultural industry and its impacts upon farmers’ health and well-being. This will help generate a more critical understanding of how loneliness affects other social, cultural and economic groups.

This analysis of farming loneliness fits within a broader canon of work on farming health and well-being that encapsulates physical health (Brumby et al., 2011); depression (McLaren & Challis, 2009); stress (Price & Evans, 2009); suicide (Garnham & Bryant, 2014); and social exclusion and farm safety (Glasscock et al., 2006). Loneliness often appears as an aside to problems associated with agriculture, sometimes framed as a driver for, or outcome of, many allied conditions, but rarely studied as a condition in its own right. The following quote from a blog post on the Farm Safety Foundation (2020) website makes a strong case for investigating farming loneliness more critically:

> Loneliness isn’t about being alone, it’s about not feeling connected and this is a growing issue in farming. Farmers are increasingly spending time on their own […] There are so many wonderful things about living and working in a rural area: you’re close to nature; you’re removed from the hustle and bustle of the city; and you have endless space to yourself. But sometimes it can feel like you have too much space. Living and working in a remote area can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

It is clear that while loneliness exists in the agricultural industry, its position, and relatedly its geographies, are complex and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand the isolation that comes with farming is an expected, or at least anticipated, dimension of the job, with 'endless' geographical space providing potential opportunities for peace and reflection. Yet, too much space may be perceived as counter-productive, leading to unhealthy relationships with isolation and poor mental and physical health. For example, as farming therefore becomes an increasingly solitary activity through automation and de/re-skilling (Bell, Hullinger and Brislen, 2015), and farming spaces are fragmented by the decline of rural communities (MHF, 2019), the more negative characteristics of loneliness are beginning to feature heavily in representations of farming life.

Methods

To understand how loneliness is represented in agricultural settings, we employed a mixed-method approach, comprising a media discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews with young UK farmers. The media discourse analysis involved conducting a detailed context analysis of 100 UK and Irish newspaper articles and blogs, published between 2015 and 2021. This developed a broad understanding of how and where loneliness is both experienced by farming communities and how farmers' loneliness is reported in the media. This analysis forms the broad contextualization of this paper and informed the interview design. The media sources covered a broad range of loneliness topics, including challenging working practices; home and family life; community cohesion and personal relationships and ranged from interviews with individual farmers to prominent figures in agricultural communities, mental health practitioners and charity workers. They also followed various case studies of farmers' everyday lives as well as commentary on significant national and global issues. Such breadth of reporting was productive in drawing together a comprehensive picture of contemporary

loneliness in farming and prompted a more critical investigation through the interviews of how known loneliness characteristics form in place.

The initial meta-analysis established five thematic codes relating to farming loneliness: *The situation*: the broad context and consequences of agricultural work. *Activities*: the physical and emotional labour that goes into farming and the running of farm spaces. *Location*: the physical spaces of farming and the absences and presences associated with these. *People*: those connected to farming, e.g. families, co-workers, friends and communities. *Responses*: the (in)formal approaches taken to acknowledge and support loneliness in farming communities. These codes were intersecting and, when read together, built a significant narrative of how loneliness is represented, articulated and felt geographically in media representations of everyday farming life, at a range of spatial scales from bodies through to wider communities.

We next conducted semi-structured interviews with young UK farmers working in agricultural contexts. This helped develop a nuanced understanding of how, why and where loneliness is experienced and perceived by farmers and how loneliness is managed and supported in farming communities. We interviewed 20 UK farmers aged 18-30 about their perceptions and experiences of loneliness and how this intersects with personal connections, everyday interactions and contemporary farming pressures (e.g. Brexit, climate change, financial struggles, the anti-meat agenda). The research was conducted between January and April 2021, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and during a period in which the UK was in its third state of national lockdown. The interviews were subsequently carried out either via Zoom or phone call, which presented some digital challenges in terms of connectivity and privacy, as well as some interesting opportunities in terms of accessing a geographically wider participant group than we had originally anticipated.

Each encounter lasted 1-1.5 hours and participants were invited to choose a comfortable and safe location to be interviewed in. This meant that discussions of loneliness were often conducted in the very places that farming practices were enacted (e.g. homes, farm buildings, fields and cabs). The sample comprised 11 women and nine men from 16 UK counties and a mixture of first generation (8) and family succession (12) farmers, which prompted interesting considerations of how loneliness might intersect with the farming practices of those with varied knowledges and experiences of agricultural life. Our participants also farmed in different ways – in combinations of dairy, livestock and arable – and in a variety of positions including owners, labourers and merchandisers.

Like the media analysis, our coding revealed multi-scalar qualities to farming loneliness which spanned three spatial scales: farmers' bodies, farming spaces and farming communities. Examining loneliness at these scales is important in recognising loneliness, particularly problem loneliness, not as an extraordinary event but as performed and inhabited in and through everyday spaces and activities. Examining loneliness at the scale of the body reveals the emotional and affective characteristics of loneliness through labour and routine. Here, loneliness can become embedded in repetitive, mundane tasks, usually performed away from others, and over long hours. The spaces of farming reveal loneliness as entrenched in practice and activity, of 'being isolated' in 'open spaces' and 'working away' from home. Farm spaces are, of course, not ostensibly lonely places but this lens acknowledges that farmers may potentially inhabit loneliness through the spaces of agricultural life and activity. Finally, farming communities reveal the environments in which problem loneliness is (or perhaps can be) tackled and mediated. Throughout our analysis we show how these scales operate (and compete) relationally when recognising and understanding loneliness in the self and in others; as well as when instigating, disseminating and receiving (in)formal loneliness support in wider communities.

Embodied loneliness – 'feeling' lonely as a farmer

We begin this analysis at the scale of the body, and in particular farmers' individual subjective experiences of loneliness. Here, feelings of pain, aching and tiredness were recognised as challenging issues (particularly concerning farm safety) alongside well-being problems associated with anxieties, pressures and stress:

> It's a lot of isolated work. It's long hours, […] people are often tired all the time so I can definitely see how it [loneliness] happens. You know, there are times when you get lonely, you can get a bit down about it (Charlie).

> I'm definitely not superwoman. Yeah, I just, I think like the last few days, I've been so tired and lonely and I just sort of [feel like a] zombie and then then it just takes one little thing to like, like the calves getting out and thinking "oh god, I really can't do this anymore" (Sally).

These extracts highlight the emotional and affective embodiment of loneliness through labour and routine. It is evident that loneliness, through everyday practice, can be actualised in this embodied sense as a corporeal force. As Houghton et al. (2017, p. 12, emphasis in original) argue: 'the pain from loneliness resembles the affective component of the physical pain response – in other words, it hurts to be lonely!' Loneliness can therefore be considered as having an 'affective-ness' (Bissell, 2010) that has consequences for physical and cognitive health and well-being. Both Sally and Charlie emphasise the routinised and performative characteristics of loneliness. Whilst being alone does not automatically make someone lonely, coupling lone working and isolation with the pressures of the job accentuates how loneliness can become problematic. Following Thien (2005, p. 453), we therefore consider the subjective and intersubjective emotional and affective qualities of loneliness to be woven through the 'emotional landscapes of everyday life' in ways that give meaning to our lives.

Indeed, as Davidson and Milligan (2004) argue, our emotions are spatially and relationally mediated and articulated in such ways that matter to how we move through the world. Discourses of the 'everyday-ness' of loneliness were evident throughout the interviews through discussions of repetitive, mundane tasks usually performed away from others that constitute an interweaving of the physical and emotional pain, aching and exhaustion that is central to the extracts above.

Media reportage also characterises the links between emotional stress and loneliness as particular to farmers, with discussions of the impacts of emotional isolation and the declining emotional health of farmers upon the industry:

> Farmers, particularly male farmers, suffer from what is known as "[e]motional isolation", when they have lots of acquaintances, but are limited with the amount of friends that they can talk to about issues they are experiencing. Many men struggle as they feel they have no one to talk to or that others will not understand their difficulties. Farmers feel trapped by their situation, feeling lonely and stressed which can have a serious impact on both physical and mental health (Cunnane, 2016, n.p.).

This quote reveals the dualism of problem loneliness – whereby loneliness is at once a *driver* for mental and emotional ill health and stress as well as a *symptom* (Franklin, 2009). Within the interviews, Alex puts this into context, arguing that the emotional issues associated with loneliness sits within a constellation of allied farming impacts:

> There definitely needs to be some sort of support system in farming in terms of like mental [and] emotional support. I can list […] the amount of people I know who have committed suicide because of mainly financial issues linked to farming basically. And like lone working, you know, people cutting corners and having accidents and then

> the accident means they can't farm, they get depressed and lonely – and there's a lot of that – and a lot of like divorces and stuff as well (Alex).

It is clear then that the production of embodied emotional labour plays a significant role in how loneliness may be produced, felt and articulated through subjective relationships between bodies, emotions and spaces (Davidson et al., 2005; Pile, 2010). This highlights how loneliness is embedded in everyday embodied practices of farming life. Discourses of *being* a lonely farmer were prominent in the interviews and phrases like 'farming is a lonely job' were regularly used to defend problems associated with loneliness in everyday farming life. Among our participants, farming was articulated as isolating work, especially in relation to the decline in face-to-face connection over successive generations and the difficulties many farmers face in attending social events – something that was exacerbated through the successive COVID-19 lockdowns. Loneliness in this context was viewed as a consequence of farming being hard work that, in turn, results in emotional and physical exhaustion:

> I mean farming is, it is lonely, it is high pressure […]. But, I mean, I love it. That's just, it's my life. Farming isn't, it isn't a job, it's my whole life, and everything else has to come after that, you know, even relationships, everything, it all has to come after the farm. […] you know, that's how it is (Simon).

> Yeah, well, we're, yeah, not gunna [sic] beat around the bush really, farming is a lonely job. You don't get much human interaction. But that's the nature of the job really (Andrew).

Taken collectively, these comments imply a sense of workplace burnout that can be aggravated or intensified through loneliness. Importantly, these examples problematise the traditional hegemonic hyper-masculine image of the farmer. Recent work has considered how more monolithic depictions of farming masculinities – focused on motifs of strength,

stoicism, toughness and ruggedness – may be challenged by younger farmers who are potentially more likely to open up about a broader range of complex and difficult to articulate agricultural experiences, beliefs and practices (Pini, 2008; Brandth & Haugen, 2016). Yet, as the following quotes attest, the consequences of this traditional framework remain evident in some young farmers' images of farming identities. Here, loneliness and isolation appear to rub up against traditional representations of the 'typical farmer'.

> I guess farming is quite a traditional thing. The people who do farm are often farming in, or following in their families' footstep, and often that's their fathers, whether it's a girl or a boy. I'm speaking very broadly here, but I guess, you know, a part of being a farmer is being a man and part of being a man is being tough, and I guess it all sort of comes from there. Farmers think they're the toughest of the tough (Charlie).

> I think that's [loneliness] certainly a stigmatism [sic] that people don't want to bring it up because they're a big tough farmer because they can be tough with the weather and the land (Will).

These quotes imply a sense of emotional resistance to acknowledging problem loneliness – perhaps through shame or fear of failure – whereby it is excused as something that can simply be shrugged off (cf. Davies, Disney and Harrowell, 2021). Hitherto, farming loneliness is clearly not only a male concern (indeed, from a meta-analysis of loneliness studies, Maes et al. (2019) found males and females to experience loneliness similarly across the lifespan). Within our sample, many of the young women farmers expressed similar hyper-masculine language when talking about their experiences of loneliness and isolation through farming practice:

> [I] definitely feel lonely, during lambing time. I think because you are so busy, and the exhaustion comes in pretty quickly. Then you're like, just, you know, you get into

> the rhythm of it, and you're just like, used to being exhausted. And you know, like, the end is in sight, and you'll just sleep for like, a week. But yeah, no, it can be a, you know, it's just relentless. You know, unless people come to you, you can't really see people (Jennie).

> […] if I feel lonely, I just ring somebody. Like I'll just, you know, if I'm on the tractor or something, I've always got my headphones around my neck so I'll just ring someone (Catie).

Collectively, these discourses of loneliness as part of embodied farming practice were evident throughout the interviews and were often juxtaposed alongside narratives of the 'proud' farmer, of 'being in charge' and of solitary working being 'nothing new'. This type of rhetoric means that farmers often appear to shrug off the (perceived) socio-emotional stigma associated with loneliness by 'getting on with it' until, in some circumstances, it is too late. Such examples therefore underscore how traditional identities can present barriers to recognising and seeking support for problem loneliness (cf. Roy, Tremblay & Robertson, 2014). This is particularly pertinent among farmers who, through large-scale and ongoing adaptations to agricultural practice and everyday life may struggle to perceive their 'fit' (McClaren & Challis, 2009) or embodied sense of belonging in contemporary agricultural settings.

Spaces of loneliness – situating loneliness 'on the farm':

This section examines the ways in which our young farmers articulated loneliness in and through farming spaces. Media representations of farming loneliness often proceed from the point of farmers being isolated and define loneliness as existence away from others. Within our interviews, 'working away' was a prominent theme, with many participants conveying how being separated from their families, friends or communities for extended periods or

working alone in isolated locations were triggers for problem loneliness. Moreover, the coupling of loneliness with specific roles, such as tending animals and crops, managing fields, parlours or homes was also conspicuous, and it is through such activities that discourses of loneliness became apparent:

> Working alone a lot. You know, when you're alone with your thoughts in the track cab it can be lonely I tend to try and have things, like I listen to a podcast or something like that to try and keep my mind a little bit more occupied. Like, just listening to the radio is sometimes a bit, it's good to have something to sort of keep your mind busy. I think, you can be alone with your thoughts for too long sometimes (Charlie).

> I absolutely agree there is a lot of lone working because I remember back in 2014-16, when I was working [by] myself, you know, I could go two or three days without seeing anyone and if I did see someone, it would be the person coming to collect their milk or the person coming to drop off the feed on the farm. […] Yeah, as I say, you know, I can experience long, long periods of that and, and mentally, yes, it absolutely does affect you (Brendon).

These excerpts provide clear instances of where loneliness and the spaces of farming intersect, with long hours, isolation, stress and the blurring of work and home all viewed as feeding problem loneliness. What links these representations is an inherent geography to experiences of farming loneliness. Specific spaces, like ‘the cab’, ‘the field’, ‘the parlour’ and ‘the shed’, were mentioned as spaces where farmers exist away from others. While these function as part of working practices, the above interview extracts imply the solitary nature of farming encourages problems to be dwelt upon and not talked about. Crucially, this reveals

loneliness to imbricate the affective, embodied feeling of *being* lonely with the *grounding* of loneliness in specific places, and its mobilisation through repetitive farming practice.

Rendering the geographies of loneliness as multi-scalar, therefore, extends classic monolithic taxonomies of the socio-emotional loneliness characteristics (Weiss, 1973) by highlighting its capacity to weave the emotional, the social and the spatial together in unique, intersecting ways. As implied throughout this paper, loneliness is not the same as being alone, yet the relational consequences of finding oneself 'alone' or having 'endless space to yourself' frequently appeared in the interviews, revealing close connections to instances in which farmers might begin to acknowledge how and why loneliness could become problematic. Indeed, to draw from Davidson and Milligan's (2004) work, the circularity of emotion and space mean we make sense of space through our emotional interpretations and experiences, while simultaneously space affects our emotional sense of self. In terms of loneliness, this emphasises the importance of space in perceiving, experiencing and articulating loneliness. Evidence also suggests that farmers are becoming increasingly adept at atomising and reassembling their farming identities, practices and attachments to places in such ways that manage the social and emotional consequences of 'not belonging' (Cheshire, Meurk & Woods, 2013), particularly as agricultural practice becomes an increasingly globalised phenomenon.

Beyond agricultural practice, the sites of 'the home', 'the farm' and 'the rural location' were all key spaces our young farmers associated with loneliness and isolation. Here, representations of loneliness in the home and on the farm focused primarily on the impacts on farming families – predominantly, but not exclusively, the role of women – and revealed instances where families felt disconnected from the wider community and extended family members, or where family members felt isolated within families themselves:

> And [husband’s] doing most of it on his own as well and it's, it is long days for him, he comes home and he just immediately, once we’ve had dinner, he’s just immediately asleep. Like mostly he doesn’t actually come to bed, he just, he sleeps on the couch cus [sic] I can't wake him up to come to bed. But no, don't think I'm, please don’t think I’m complaining because it is like amazing. But it is bloody hard and it is lonely for everyone at times, not just the men, but the wives and girlfriends and stuff as well (Melanie).

> At the time obviously like my then wife was here and I could talk to her, but you know, she was a nurse and she was away doing long shifts. […] I always remember this day, […] I'm sitting there, I'm basically, I didn’t have any credit whatsoever, the bank had frozen my accounts, I'm sitting there, my wife was away working a 12 hour shift, I had nobody to phone. Who do you phone in that case? My dad had died, my grandpa had died. The only other person in the business at the time was my gran and she had dementia, you couldn’t talk to her. I just felt totally alone and totally lonesome and helpless as well. So I totally understand how loneliness can be an issue in modern farming (Brendon).

These quotes reinforce how the ‘felt’ characteristics of loneliness discussed earlier in this paper exist prominently *in place*. In its broadest context, loneliness can be considered a function of farming life whereby the identities of agricultural families are socially and culturally reproduced, creating a form of ‘farming habitus’ that guides farming practices and behaviours, usually through embedded habits, traditions and routines (Price, 2010). This type of habitus may therefore be considered somewhat exclusionary, yet, it is the instances in the participants’ experiences where spousal connections are strained by the temporalities of farming life that reveal loneliness to become most spatially problematic. This extends Pile’s

(2010, p. 16) suggestion that emotional geographies value the interweaving of ‘proximity, intimacy and closeness’ by revealing the emotions associated with loneliness as creating voids and separations – something akin, perhaps, to emotional distance. Such sentiments chime with some of the spatial anxieties surrounding loneliness (Franklin, 2009) by emphasising the ways that loneliness can be both hidden and occur ‘in plain sight’.

Supporting and mediating loneliness in and through farming communities:

Our third dimension of farming loneliness sits at the scale of the community and many of our young farmers spoke of how their experiences and perceptions of loneliness and isolation intersected with their local communities:

> […] there's always your neighbours, do you know what I mean? […] Go just talk to your neighbour. Like farmers are such understanding people, and they'll always stop for a chat. So I think that would be a better thing to push in the agricultural sector really, because farmers don't like, you know, they don't like speaking to people that they don't necessarily know (Simon).

Simon’s comment infers the importance of promoting support at the scale of the community and it is at this scale where the relationalities of emotional care became apparent. In these contexts, the relationships between people and places revealed complexities in how and where loneliness was understood. Other interviewees provided a sense that while support was evident (and welcomed) there were concerns that it was unlikely to be adopted due to various stigma associated with weakness:

> I think there are lots of support [services], it’s just whether people access them, cus [sic] they feel embarrassed. That would be my concern, that they just wouldn't use them. I think they are out there [but] I do think people would struggle to access it,

> maybe just, just for their own [benefit], I think that would be themselves, not the fact that it's not there (Sally).

> So there’s a group that farmers can phone and there's also a couple of support groups. I think that personally, it’s not that there is a lack of support. I think that there's a certain stigma in farming that you don’t really open up and ask for help (Brendon).

While there are various charities and organisations which offer support to rural residents, and most participants were aware of these, countering the stereotypes and stigma of talking about and/or acknowledging problem loneliness is one of the most significant hurdles for farming communities. Notwithstanding this, as these quotes suggest, loneliness support is somewhat paradoxical. Talking about and communicating worries, fears and problems are important and straightforward mechanisms for combatting problem loneliness (Mills, 2017) and have the potential to mediate and mitigate the negative consequences of loneliness, away from the farm. Yet, it is precisely this action of opening up that creates a sense of emotional resistance, primarily through the perceived stigma of admitting to being lonely. Following Atkinson, Lawson and Wiles (2011) it is evident then that the desirability of care, and the spaces of care, are relationally produced through subjective associations with dependency and vulnerability. Hence, communities that perceive loneliness to be a weakness may perceive acknowledging it as stigmatising themselves, their farm or their entire community as lonely, reinforcing processes that shirk emotional care by hiding, masking or even ignoring problem loneliness.

In cementing the geographies of loneliness as a multi-scalar emotional concept, parallels can be drawn with Goffman’s (1963) notion of stigma and its effect upon how the self is presented to others. Stigma is broadly shaped by identity performance and how the self is constructed and managed in the presence of others. It forms part of what Goffman calls

‘impression management’ – the ability to create and maintain believable identity performances. Stigma therefore represents a ‘spoiled identity’ that transforms a person from being ‘whole’ to discredited or discounted. Hence, in the context of loneliness it is the relational consequences associated with the perceived stigma of loneliness that presents a significant barrier to accessing external support. This questions the effectiveness of communities alone in providing the right conditions through which to support loneliness, particularly when emotional barriers appear endemic in farming cultures.

Hence, as a subjective state of being, recognising loneliness in others – particularly communities – is complex, particularly in terms of reading the signs and signals of problem loneliness in farming communities. The quotes in this section reflect how the ‘silent epidemic’ of loneliness mentioned at the beginning of this paper enmeshes individuals, spaces and communities. Problem loneliness can move invisibly within farming communities, being either unnoticed, or worse, unchallenged by communities that may feel ill-equipped to offer meaningful support to those experiencing loneliness issues (McClaren & Challis, 2017). Yet, Will and Ailsa talk of the importance of instigating emotional care-giving in their relative communities:

> I've gone to the farm to have a cup of tea, partly because I've got a good relationship with them [farmer], you know, I might know them from another club or something like that. But yeah, there's been two cases where I've just gone and got a cup of tea. […] I was there to have a cup of tea with them and it was just because I couldn't stand seeing, just literally no one saw em [sic], their farm’s going down the hole. They could be losing it (Will).

> I started the young farmers [club division] because like, you know, I felt like people needed to connect with like-minded people. So that was kinda [sic] hoping to, yeah, I suppose combat loneliness a bit (Ailsa).

This shows how individual and community loneliness mitigation are intrinsically tied into notions of belonging and the structural and functional characteristics of social support in geographical communities (Anderson, 2003). Finlay and Kobayashi (2018) argue that successful loneliness management strategies often stem from neighbourhoods (and relatedly, communities) that provide adequate social capital resources, such as durable socioeconomic and sociodemographic connections. An example of this comes from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2017, p. 21) which characterises the notion of '[c]onnection-friendly communities'. Linking this back with the above quotes, it is clear how the geographies of loneliness (and specifically support) are multi-scalar, being both an extension of self-care and caring for others, whereby support becomes a reciprocal responsibility of the self and other that is performed and articulated in place.

Such community responsibility was particularly prominent during the initial waves of the COVID-19 pandemic when virus mitigation measures like social distancing, self-isolation, furloughing and the closure of vital community services prevented physical sources of community support and significantly increased reporting of loneliness (MHF, 2021). Our participants regularly spoke of the role of social media groups, online communities and chatrooms in connecting communities and families during the pandemic:

> [W]e've got like a community Facebook page. So a lot of the community are involved in that. And, you know, okay, it's not the same just now [with COVID] because we can't just drop in and see people, but, you know, they're always putting up on it, "if you're ever needing anything", or especially with that snow, you know, in February,

> they were like, "if you need anything, just ask me", "we can easily help out". […] So yeah, I think, I think there is a lot of checking up on people (Norah).

Crucially though, the benefits of connecting people through social media were outweighed considerably by desires for 'authentic' proximate connections:

> Since COVID kicked off it has become even more lonely because it literally is working and seeing nobody other than through things like Zoom and Teams (Andrew).

> I've got a few people [staff] that work on their own, and they live far from family and a few of them, I've seen they've posted messages saying that during the, like the depths of lockdown, like with loneliness and I've messaged them saying 'look, literally we can talk', Zoom calls aren't the same (Frank).

Indeed, within the interviews, physical community events were considered more important spaces through which loneliness could be articulated and discussed. This was often due to how the sociability of being around others might help reduce the conditions for problem loneliness to take hold. As Bowlby (2011) argues, emotional care is proactive, in that caring for and caring about others are intrinsically linked to active, meaningful and reciprocal social relationships. Hence, attending to the geographies of loneliness at the scale of community highlights the importance placed upon agricultural spaces, practices and communities in creating some of the preferred environments for supporting problem loneliness. While the dependence on durable, long-lasting relationships can no longer be relied upon (Franklin, 2009), there is a sense that the spaces through which belonging can be enacted – be this through routinised behaviour or happenstance – are vitally important in recognising and mediating the negative effects of prolonged loneliness in the self and in others.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have drawn attention to the geographies of loneliness in farming communities as an original and important lens through which to understand, more broadly, the challenging and shifting contemporary landscapes of belonging, attachment and care. This is significant as media, policy and academic discourses of loneliness detail explicit challenges to people's health and well-being, as well as their emotional and ontological sense of being in the world, meaning loneliness is very much woven into the social, cultural, emotional and affective fabric of people's everyday lives. In doing so we have contributed to existing work on the social conditions of loneliness (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Batsleer & Duggan, 2020; Franklin, 2009) by considering new ways of understanding loneliness as an intrinsically spatial phenomenon that exists in and through everyday life at multiple, intersecting scales from bodies, families and friendships, to homes, workplaces and communities. We argue through this paper that spatialising loneliness in this way is vitally important in generating new knowledge of how loneliness manifests geographically, how it is embedded in everyday practice and routine, and how experiences and perceptions of loneliness can be relationally (re)produced.

Identifying loneliness as an intrinsically spatial and scaled phenomenon through this lens of agricultural practice therefore makes three important contributions to geographical knowledge. First, we acknowledge how loneliness is 'emplaced' through everyday practice and behaviour, and how loneliness can become embedded through discourses of hegemonic cultural identities – such as the 'tough farmer'. This helps ground the emotional, affective and social characteristics of loneliness as a felt, embodied process that is relationally produced and articulated in families, workplaces and communities. Second, we argue that recognising

loneliness to be intrinsically spatial gives texture to the invisibilities characterised in the analysis. As Franklin et al. (2019, p. 129) suggest:

> The slow creep from strong to weaker bonds across multiple bases of belonging may engender a gradual accretion of embodied expressive absences that come to replace the more positive space-time of 'pre-reflective affirmation' through mutual regard.

In a geographical sense, our analysis of farming communities reveals loneliness to be acutely actualised, both through everyday practice but also in terms of the spatial anxieties associated with emotional distance, meaning loneliness has the capacity to infiltrate felt socio-emotional relationships and interactions and is enacted differently within families, friendships, workplaces, neighbourhoods and communities in diverse and intersecting ways. Third, we emphasise the relationalities of emotional care that are affected by the stigma of loneliness. In doing so, we call for greater understanding of how the spatial characteristics of loneliness discussed in this paper imbricate perceptions and experiences of physical and social isolation and mental health – both in the context of shocks or extraordinary events and in everyday social and intimate contexts.

In closing, this research opens up real-world opportunities to explore how and why loneliness is produced *in* certain spaces, as well as how loneliness is performed *through* different spatial contexts. We follow Batsleer & Duggan (2020:14) in cautioning against categorising all loneliness as 'an epidemic, social plague and crisis'. Indeed, these authors state that neoliberalisation and austerity strategies over the last decade have had direct consequences upon the impacts of problem loneliness in the UK. In rural contexts this is witnessed through reduced funding for public services, transport and infrastructure (Rural Services Network, 2015), all of which compound a sense of socio-spatial isolation. Additionally, austerity, coupled with the contemporary focus on the individual, produces an enhanced feeling of

disposability, whereby possessions, interactions and intimate relations exist in a continual state of flux (Franklin, 2009), again, creating the ideal conditions for problem loneliness to set in. Moreover, our discussions of farming loneliness specifically (and rural loneliness more generally) draw further parallels with recent work on the social geographies of despair (DeVerteuil, 2021), particularly in relation to the systemic production of health denial among often male, rural populations. That said, it has not been our objective to attempt to 'solve' loneliness or provide a panacea for its ill effects. Indeed, as Qualter et al. (2015) argue, loneliness can be extremely useful to people in adapting from negative to positive change as well as motivating those experiencing loneliness to maintain or repair connections with others. Our paper, therefore, generates questions as to how the spatial qualities of loneliness intersect with social and emotional characteristics of peoples (and communities) everyday lives and whether closer attention to these can help generate the right conditions, and in the right spaces, through which to recognise the difference between potentially positive experiences of loneliness, burgeoning problem loneliness and action support to prevent prolonged loneliness from becoming problematic.

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