

A Lonely Generation? Exploring the Geographies of Loneliness of
Millennials in County Durham

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Abstract

This thesis explores the geographies of loneliness by drawing on experiences of millennial loneliness in County Durham. It takes a critical generational approach and explores how the spatial-temporal context that millennials have grown up and live within has shaped their everyday life, relationships, and emotions. Living and working following the 2008 economic recession and during a period of austerity has meant that millennials are confronted with high rates of unemployment, stagnated wages, difficulty in accessing the housing market, and reduced access to services. Based in County Durham, this research also explores how the area's social geography and structural inequalities have led to these issues being exacerbated for the County's millennials. Loneliness is understood here as a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state. Using this definition, this thesis takes a multi-scalar approach to unpick the everyday experience of loneliness. Approaching loneliness from the state level and the role of governmental decisions on everyday life and loneliness, through to the intimate, embodied level, this thesis gives a multi-faceted, subjective, spatial, and politicised account of loneliness. Situated within a feminist, phenomenological and relational theoretical framework, this project values the intimate, lived experience of individuals, and explores how identities, spaces, and experiences are formed through interactions with others. Data was collected using 1.) life story interviews 2.) personal community maps 3.) relationship diaries and 4.) an (auto)ethnography of County Durham. The key finding threaded throughout this thesis is that loneliness disrupts, unsettles, and troubles a sense of security in individuals. This is explored here in terms of disrupted biographies and a (dis)connection to place, community, and personal relationships. Importantly, structural inequalities and vulnerabilities make the experience of loneliness more difficult to navigate and overcome. Geography matters to loneliness. This project is thus a timely addition to the gap in geographic literature.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Susan Fortescue. Sue died in August 2022 before I completed this work. She was always so supportive, genuinely interested, and enthusiastic about my PhD. Sue was an inspiration and my very own feminist icon. She is missed every day.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Dedication	iii
List of tables and figures	viii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
1.1. What is loneliness?	3
1.1.1. The UK response to loneliness: who is lonely?.....	7
1.2. The temporalities of the research: why millennials?	8
1.3. The spatialities of the research: why County Durham?	9
1.3.1. An overview of County Durham	10
1.3.2. Shaping the uneven landscape of County Durham: deindustrialisation, disinvestment and austerity cuts	11
1.4. A disrupted biography	13
1.5. Research questions.....	14
1.6. Research aims	14
1.7. Thesis breakdown.....	14
Chapter 2. The Emotions, Relationships and Everyday Life of Millennials: Framing the Research.....	18
2.1. Geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships: conceptually framing the research 18	
2.1.1. A feminist approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships.....	19
2.1.2. A phenomenological approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships	23
2.1.3. A relational approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships	25
2.1.4. Bringing the strands of the conceptual framework together.....	26
2.2. Youth transitions, adulthood and the millennial generation	27
2.2.1. Transitions and expectations of adulthood.....	29
2.2.2. (In)dependence and the ‘good’ neoliberal adult.....	33
2.2.3. Critical temporalities of adulthood.....	34
2.2.4. Conclusion	38
2.3. Relationships	38
2.3.1. A changing landscape of relationships?	39
2.3.2. The ‘right’ type of relationships?.....	42
2.3.3. Time-spaces of relationships	43

2.3.4.	Conclusion	44
2.4.	Place: imagined geographies and a sense of belonging to hometown.....	45
2.4.1.	Imagined geographies and left-behind places	45
2.4.2.	A sense of belonging	47
2.5.	Place: everyday life, emotion and relationships in the domestic sphere	49
2.5.1.	Politics and geographies of the home	50
2.5.2.	Multigenerational homes.....	52
2.5.3.	Conclusion	53
2.6.	Geographies of loneliness	53
2.7.	Conclusion	56
Chapter 3. Researching Emotion, Everyday Life and Relationships: Reflections on a Feminist, Phenomenological and Relational Methodology.....		58
3.1.	Methodology and research design.....	58
3.1.1.	Ethical approval.....	61
3.1.2.	Recruitment.....	61
3.1.3.	The participants.....	66
3.1.4.	The ‘non-participants’	70
3.2.	Methods in practice	72
3.2.1.	Life story interviews	72
3.2.2.	Life story interviews in practice	73
3.2.3.	Personal community maps.....	74
3.2.4.	Relationship diaries	76
3.2.5.	(Auto)ethnography of County Durham	77
3.3.	Reflections from the field and beyond.....	78
3.3.1.	Positionality.....	78
3.3.2.	Ethical challenges	80
3.4.	Analysis.....	81
3.4.1.	Narrative analysis	81
3.4.2.	Limitations to this approach.....	84
3.4.3.	The disconnect between data collection and data analysis.....	85
3.5.	Conclusion	86
Chapter 4. Disrupted Biographies of Millennials in County Durham: Exploring Geographies of Loneliness on the Macro Scale		87
4.1.	Power and time	89
4.1.1.	“Hitting a dead end”: blocks to progress	89

4.1.2.	“Stuck in a vicious cycle”: waiting as movement.....	94
4.1.3.	(Un)supportive spaces and feeling (un)cared for	98
4.1.4.	Conclusion	103
4.2.	The social and cultural value of time.....	104
4.2.1.	Inevitable disruptions: County Durham millennials and economic/financial ‘milestones’ 105	
4.2.2.	Out-of-sync: disruptions to emotional and relational ‘milestones’	109
4.2.3.	The highs and lows of difference: the emotional work and loneliness of being and feeling ‘other’	115
4.2.4.	Biographical disruptions within local cultural atmospheres	119
4.2.5.	Conclusion	122
Chapter 5.	(Dis)Connection to Hometown and Loneliness on the Meso Scale: Imagined Geographies, Community and Belonging in County Durham	124
5.1.	The imagined geographies of County Durham: cultural isolation and loneliness.....	125
5.2.	Feeling known: solitude, privacy and loneliness	132
5.3.	Re-orientated: comfort, connection and belonging.....	137
5.4.	Conclusion	144
Chapter 6.	Loneliness on the Intimate Scale: Embodied Geographies and (Dis)Connection in the Domestic Sphere	146
6.1.	The crunch points of loneliness.....	147
6.1.1.	Time-spaces symbolising connection	148
6.1.2.	Embodying relationships, experiencing emotion	153
6.1.3.	Conclusion	154
6.2.	Embodied loneliness: shrinking space, stretching time	154
6.2.1.	Shrinking space, stretching time: embodying gender in the domestic sphere	155
6.2.2.	Embodying structural inequalities in the domestic sphere.....	161
6.3.	Feelings of (un)certainty: colliding norms and social relations in the domestic sphere	163
6.4.	Conclusion	170
Chapter 7.	Discussion and Conclusion	172
7.1.	Tying the empirical chapters together	173
7.1.1.	How do millennials live through and experience loneliness in a neoliberal society?	174
7.1.2.	How does living in County Durham shape the experience of loneliness?.....	175
7.2.	The contributions of this research.....	177
7.2.1.	Geography matters: loneliness is a spatial and political issue	177
7.2.2.	A relational geography of loneliness	178

7.2.3.	The crunch points of loneliness: living and feeling structural inequalities	179
7.2.4.	The (dis)orientation of loneliness	179
7.2.5.	Feeling connected and cared for by the states supports personal wellbeing and connection.....	180
7.3.	Policy recommendations.....	181
7.4.	Recommendations for future research.....	184
7.5.	Conclusion	186
	Bibliography.....	187
	Appendix A. Ethical Approval	209
	Appendix B. Recruitment Poster	210
	Appendix C. Recruitment Leaflet.....	211
	Appendix D. Recruitment Locations	212
	Appendix E. Sample of Interview Questions	213
	Appendix F. Consent Form.....	217
	Appendix G. Information Sheet	218
	Appendix H. Debrief Sheet	220
	Appendix I. Personal Community Map.....	222
	Appendix J. Relationship Diary	224

List of tables and figures

Table 1. Methods of data collection and rationale, page. 60

Table 2. Participant profiles, pages. 67-68

Table 3. Participant clusters, page. 69

Table 4. Analytical framework, pages. 83-84

Figure 1. Participant definitions of loneliness, page 6

Figure 2. Personal community map, page. 75

Chapter 1. Introduction

The topic of loneliness was brought to the surface during the global pandemic, Covid-19. When the United Kingdom was placed into lockdown in March 2020, physical distancing and isolation was brought into the everyday vernacular and public consciousness. Concerns around loneliness became an everyday topic and an everyday worry. This all took place after I designed my research project, and after I collected my data. When I first started thinking about loneliness, and what a social geographical perspective could add, this topic was largely reserved to the fringes of society. While there were organisations, charities, and the UK Government's 2018 strategy to "tackle loneliness", loneliness was still not at the forefront of wider public concern. Further, loneliness was distinctly apolitical, and was presented as something that anyone, anywhere could experience.

I do not dispute this in this thesis. Rather, I suggest that loneliness is something that *should* be politicised and thought about spatially. This has started to be unpicked in the social sciences (Batsleer and Duggan, 2021; Stenning and Hall, 2018; Wilkinson, 2022). This thesis is, however, the first piece of research to take a multi-scalar, geographical, rich and qualitative approach to loneliness. Here, I consider the spatialities and temporalities that contextualise how socioeconomic circumstances intersect with and exacerbate the nature and extent of loneliness. More specifically, I address the vulnerabilities, inequalities and the uneven landscape that can produce the socio-spatial conditions of loneliness for millennials in County Durham.

Part of this politicisation of loneliness is considering the ways that people can *fall through the cracks* of society. I was first struck by this idea when I watched Carole Morley's '*Dreams of a Life*' in 2011. This documentary followed the tragic case of Joyce Vincent, who was found dead in her London home two years after her death, raising the spectre of loneliness persisting in a crowd. It confronted issues of loneliness, disconnection, and alienation from friends, family, and the state. There have been several other high-profile cases like Joyce's. Sheila Seleone was found two and a half years following her death in 2019. This was despite concerns raised to her landlord and police (Butler, 2022). Laura Winham was found in 2021 three years after her death. This was despite welfare concerns raised to the NHS, social services, and her housing association. Laura's gas had been cut off, and her disability benefits

stopped by the Department for Work and Pensions (Butler, 2023a). In 2023 Robert Alton was found after a presumed six years. Concerns were not raised by his landlord who continued to be paid through his housing benefits. The local council also did not follow up on his council tax arrears (Butler, 2023b).

Each of these tragic stories speaks to the disconnection between individuals and their personal contacts, local communities, local government, and state-led institutions, such as the NHS. A failure to *join the dots* meant that Joyce, Sheila, Laura, Robert, and others, were left unsupported, neglected, and unnoticed. While these cases are extreme examples of loneliness and disconnection, they highlight the ways individuals, services, and organisations are stretched to their limits. The lack of funding and time means that even those with the most altruistic intentions are left unable to ensure cases such as this do not occur. Over a decade of austerity in the UK has pushed the NHS, social services, governmental departments, housing associations and local councils to the edge, leaving some of the most vulnerable behind. While some may question where neighbours and local communities feature in these harrowing stories, I would argue that those individuals may also find their everyday lives stretched to the limit. Particularly in the post-covid landscape, during the cost-of-living crisis, over a decade of austerity, and disinvestment in areas such as County Durham, those who occupy these spaces may find their capacity to *notice* stretched thinly.

This thesis was thus borne from these concerns. Within this chapter I contextualise the spatialities and temporalities of this project, explaining why I have chosen County Durham and the millennial generation as a gateway into the topic of loneliness. This chapter also helps to contextualise the various scales I approach loneliness from. With this research, I shine a light on the topic from the scale of governmental decisions and actions, and neoliberal societal norms, through to the intimate, embodied scale.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. Section 1.1 questions what is loneliness? Here I outline existing definitions alongside my own interpretation of loneliness. In this section I also incorporate the voices of this project's participants, who I asked to define loneliness in their own words. The definition of loneliness in this project is therefore informed by the lived experience of the participants, alongside existing definitions in academic and policy literatures. 1.2 outlines who I mean when I am referring to millennials. Here, I also outline how the millennial generation are discussed and represented within public and media

discourses. 1.3 contextualises the research area of County Durham. I highlight the socio-economic profile and geography of the area. This is used to explain why I see this as an important area in which to interrogate the experience of loneliness. In section 1.4 I introduce the concept of a disrupted biography, which I utilise in my analytical findings. Here, I share some of my own disrupted biography and acknowledge the temporal distance between starting this project in 2017 and completing it in 2023. My own disrupted biography helped me to interpret the analysis and it has made this thesis what it is. Sections 1.5 and 1.6 outline the research questions and aims. I close this chapter in section 1.7 with a thesis breakdown. Here I summarise my arguments and focus of the following chapters.

1.1. What is loneliness?

Here I draw on the ways loneliness has been defined, researched, and understood. For a long time, the study of loneliness has been reserved to research in health, psychology, and philosophy. Perlman and Peplau (1981) define loneliness as a mismatch between the quantity and quality of relationships an individual desires, and the quantity and quality of relationships that they have. Loneliness is thus a subjective feeling, dependent on the wants and needs of an individual. Weiss (1973) has also been influential to the understanding of loneliness. Weiss categorises loneliness as being a result of “emotional isolation” or “social isolation”. The former refers to a loss, or an absence, of close, emotional ties. The latter relates to a lack of socially integrative attachments, which is broadly understood as a (dis)connection to the wider community. This definition helps address the different scales loneliness can be encountered, as something intimate, or as a lack of community on a broader scale.

Cacioppo and Patrick (2009) take an evolutionary approach to their psychological understanding of loneliness. They argue that to feel good, and to feel a sense of wellbeing, is to be connected to others. Further, they argue that this links to a sense of feeling secure. To be disconnected is to feel insecure and lonely. While this definition could be considered essentialist, and does not embrace the positivity of solitude, it helps outline the sense of (in)security that I link to loneliness and connection throughout this thesis. I also take particular inspiration from Hertz’s (2020) understanding of loneliness here, too. Hertz argues that as well as loneliness being a subjective and social sense of disconnection, it is also a feeling of abandonment from the state. Feeling uncared for, unsupported, *unacknowledged*,

by the state is a point of view I take forward here, as I acknowledge the various scales of loneliness.

Before I go on to weave in these definitions with the voices of the participants in this study to outline my own definition of loneliness, I want to address the temporalities of loneliness. The Campaign to End Loneliness¹ helps define the various levels and states of loneliness. They argue that loneliness can be transient as it comes and goes; situational, in that it is felt only at specific times or in specific places; and chronic, in that loneliness is felt most of the time. The campaign also highlights that loneliness can be felt at varying levels of intensity. In this thesis I did not seek to categorise loneliness in such a way, nor did I actively seek participants who felt chronically lonely, lonely at specific times, or loneliness that comes and goes. As I outline in Chapter 3, I sought only to speak to participants who had experienced loneliness at some point in their lives. However, I do address the various ways loneliness can be chronic, acute, and experienced during *crunch points*. By chronic, here, I share the definition of the campaign, and understand those to be chronically lonely to be experiencing loneliness as an everyday, mostly constant, feeling. By acute loneliness, I refer to the sudden and short-lived moments of loneliness, that often emerge during *crunch points*. As I go on to discuss in Chapters 2 and 6, crunch points are spatial-temporal moments where loneliness is sharply felt.

There are also multiple terms that can become confused with loneliness. Given the definitions outlined above, loneliness is considered a subjective, negative feeling that can relate to multiple scales, from the state to the personal. Isolation, solitude, exclusion, alienation are all terms that share some similarities with feelings of loneliness. All of these terms have also found their way into the geography literature, and I draw on these in Section 2.6 in Chapter 2. These terms are also woven into this thesis, as I unpick the subjective articulations of participant loneliness in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Isolation is a term which is particularly confused with loneliness. Isolation refers to the physical distance and separation of an individual from others. To be isolated is not necessarily to be lonely, and to be surrounded by others does not necessarily mean one feels

¹ Campaign to End Loneliness is a UK-based non-profit organization that works to reach people who are chronically lonely. The campaign supports evidence-based research, links organisations, and campaign against incidents of loneliness.

connected (Laing, 2016). Isolation could be the result of living rurally, or due to disability or mobility issues. When I am using the term isolation in this thesis I am outlining how an individual is physically apart from others. Further, solitude relates to the positive aspects of being alone, or isolated, from others. Storr (1988) argues that humans are directed towards the impersonal and not just personal, and pushes against widespread assumptions that to be happy and fulfilled is only the result of a meaningful connection to others. Further, Svendsen (2017) argues that loneliness emerges when there is too little solitude. I tease out these ideas in this thesis, particularly in Section 5.2 of Chapter 5, as I open up, and break apart, ideas around loneliness, privacy and solitude.

To be excluded and alienated also resonates with the experience of loneliness. Exclusion can be taken to mean the ways in which some social groups are coded as being unwelcome in urban and rural spaces (Sibley, 1995). Unsurprisingly, being socially and spatially excluded can result in feelings of loneliness, and I draw on this in Chapter 5. Marx's concept of alienation relates to estrangement between individuals and aspects of human nature, which links to divisions in society and the class system. I see these ideas of alienation and estrangement as linking to the feeling of being uncared for by the state, of which Hertz (2020) observes. I share this view too and I have threaded this understanding of loneliness throughout the thesis.

These multiple terms therefore bleed into one another. For the purpose of clarity, I use isolation to refer to the physical separation between individuals. Solitude is used to draw on the positivity of being alone, as well as the *need* to be alone (Svendsen, 2017). When I use exclusion and alienation, it is referring to the political, cultural, and socio-economic marginalization of some groups, over others. I make this clear in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, as I thread this together with feelings of loneliness.

While this thesis is concerned with loneliness, it is also useful to clarify how I will talk about the *opposite* of feeling lonely. As Cacioppo and Patrick (2009: 15) argue, feeling good is to feel secure and connected. I therefore use the term *connected* here to distinguish what it is to not be lonely. (In)security also features in this thesis, and while I have not taken a psychoanalytical approach to this project, I have found Winnicott's (1953; 1964) term "holding environment" useful to articulate my understanding of (in)security and (dis)connection. The holding environment connects to the sense of being emotionally and

physically *held* as an infant, which provides comfort and security. I use these ideas of being held, secure and connected to argue how loneliness can be disruptive, unsettling, and trouble a sense of security in individuals.

Before I go on to close this section with my definition of loneliness, I want to outline the voices of this research’s participants. In each interview I asked the participants to share their definition of loneliness with me. This felt important as I pursued a feminist and phenomenological study that valued subjective experience, marginalised voices, and lived experience. These definitions can be found below in figure 1.

<i>“empty”</i>	<i>“feeling on the outside”</i>
<i>“lost”</i>	<i>“like an empty space”</i>
<i>“like a dark room with no door”</i>	<i>“no importance”</i>
<i>“like your situation won’t get better”</i>	<i>“feeling trapped”</i>
<i>“no ally”</i>	<i>“don’t feel like I’m anything to anyone”</i>
<i>“no connection”</i>	<i>“not feeling important to anyone”</i>
<i>“not being ‘in it’”</i>	<i>“stuck in my head”</i>
<i>“don’t have anyone to talk to about anything”</i>	<i>“dreading the routine and mundane”</i>
<i>“overwhelming sense of dread”</i>	<i>“not having somebody there”</i>
<i>“being unable to express how you’re feeling”</i>	<i>“it’s slowing defining who I am”</i>
<i>“not having the proper person to tell something to”</i>	<i>“nothing to look forward to”</i>

Figure 1. Participant definitions of loneliness

The above definitions broadly link to themes of being “trapped”, “empty”, “uncared for” and “hopeless”. This connects to the broader thread and argument that runs through this thesis. Loneliness *unsettles* and *disrupts* a sense of security, a solid foundation to *build on* and feel a sense of self, an ability to connect, to feel cared for (by others and state), to feel *orientated* (Ahmed, 2006). This works both ways, and an unsettling set of circumstances can be fertile ground for loneliness to emerge. These definitions and ideas are threaded throughout the contextual and analytical chapters.

By folding these voices into the academic interpretations of loneliness, I have chosen to define loneliness here as *a social and spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state.*

This definition helps capture the subjective nature of loneliness, as well as the multi-scalar and multi-sited experience of loneliness.

Next, I ask who is lonely? I do this by drawing on existing UK statistics of loneliness and the UK response to loneliness, before justifying my focus on millennials and County Durham.

1.1.1. The UK response to loneliness: who is lonely?

Now that I have outlined how loneliness is defined in this research, it is worth highlighting the scale of loneliness, and how work in the UK is responding to it. According to the BBC Loneliness Experiment² (Hammond, 2018), 25 million people in England feel lonely sometimes or often. The experiment found that the loneliest age group was 16-24 year olds, finding that 40% of this age group felt lonely often or very often. While this age group is slightly younger than my focus on millennials, there is some cross-over, and I will address the age range of the millennial generation in the following section.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that women reported feeling lonely more often than men, suggesting a gendered element to the experience of loneliness (Pyle and Evans, 2018). However, given that men are less likely to talk about their mental health (Mind, 2020) and suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 (Nasir et al., 2022), it is possible that male loneliness is underreported and under-researched. While loneliness is not the same as mental illness, there is a link between the two (Mind, 2020). I therefore did not request participants based on gender here. Sense found that 50% of disabled people are lonely on any given day. Action for Carers found that young carers often felt worried, stressed and lonely. Action for Children reported that 24% of parents felt lonely always or often. The Forum (2014), a charity supporting refugee communities in Britain, found that loneliness was one of the biggest challenges to settling into their new homes in the UK (Christodoulou, 2014).

There are clearly important pockets of research being carried out across the UK seeking to understand the prevalence of loneliness, as well as crucial work being done to support those who are lonely. In 2017 the Jo Cox Foundation sought to address loneliness on a wider scale, in a '*Call to Action*' report that called for national leadership on the topic of loneliness. In

² The BBC Loneliness Experiment was conducted in 2018. It is the world's largest survey of the subjective experience of loneliness. It was conducted by the BBC and University of Manchester. 55,000 people over 16 were surveyed.

January 2018, the world's first loneliness minister, Tracey Crouch, was appointed. Following this, Theresa May, the Conservative Prime Minister of the UK at the time, released a cross-party strategy to "tackle loneliness" in October 2018. This report outlined plans to incorporate social prescribing into NHS and GP services, where health professionals are able to connect individuals to existing community groups that enhance wellbeing and connection. While this is a positive step, the strategy has been criticised for not acknowledging the government's own part in high rates of loneliness (Greig, 2022; Batsleer and Duggan, 2021; Stenning and Hall, 2018). Social prescribing has the potential to push against feelings of loneliness, but the lack of funding for community groups means that some people will have better access than others. This is spatial, and I acknowledge this throughout the thesis. The report was therefore distinctly apolitical and suggested that anyone, anywhere could be lonely. While I do not disagree with this, I do see loneliness as a spatial and political issue, affecting some more than others. The following two sections set out the temporal and spatial context that I situate this research within.

1.2. The temporalities of the research: why millennials?

This section justifies my focus on the millennial generation, and highlights who I mean when I am talking about millennials. I therefore lay out the temporal positioning of this project, as I argue that the specific time that these young adults have grown up and live within has created conditions for loneliness to endure. Generations are slippery to define and I address this in Section 2.2 in Chapter 2. Here, however, I will draw on Wyn and Woodman's (2006: 497) argument that each generation is located within its own political and socioeconomic environment. A generation is therefore united in its shared broader context. This is not to suggest that being part of a generation is deterministic and ignores social differentiation. Here, I embrace the intersectionalities and inequalities that some of my participants face. Taking a generational approach does, however, enable me to highlight the ways broader decisions and policies on the state level can affect the everyday lives, emotions, and relationships of individuals.

Millennials are thought to be roughly born between the early 1980s and late 1990s. At the time of conducting and writing up this research, this generation is considered broadly to be in the stage of young adulthood. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015) report argued that millennials have been condemned to a worse set of circumstances in which to live, work, and raise a family than the generation before them. Fewer job prospects, large amounts of debt,

an inability to afford their own homes, financial insecurity, and a *failure* to reach so-called *adulthood milestones* have all been linked to life as a millennial (Chakraborty, 2010; 2013; 2016; Lyons, 2016; Moore, 2016). Millennials have also been subject to negative representations in the media and public discourse. Referred to as the “me, me, me” generation (Time, 2013) or a “snowflake” generation who lack independence. Millennials are subjected to infantilising and demeaning representations. I discuss this all in more detail in Chapters 2 and 4.

As Wyn and Woodman (2006) argue, a generation encounters the same socioeconomic and political milieu. Millennials, in the UK context, therefore have a series of shared circumstances that have fuelled the difficult circumstances that commentators above have reflected on. Many millennials entered, or attempted to enter, the workforce following the 2008 financial crisis. The financial crisis led to high levels of unemployment and debt, which made attempting to find work and start a career particularly difficult for the country’s young people. In 2010, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, announced austerity measures. Since then, these measures have seen funding cut to the public sector, with widespread job losses for those working in local government. Welfare benefits have declined and been cut. Access to libraries, community centres, museums, arts and cultural spaces have been greatly reduced as vital funding was taken away. Food banks, child poverty, financial insecurity, fewer opportunities, and unemployment are all commonplace after over a decade of austerity. County Durham, in particular, has encountered an uneven austere landscape, and I will draw on this further in the next section as I justify my focus on the county.

Here, however, I argue that these shared conditions have the potential to foster feelings of loneliness. The temporal positioning of millennials has meant that the socio-economic, political, and cultural circumstances can lead to a *wearing* and *wearying* of everyday life, emotions and relationships. This, I argue, is intimately linked to loneliness.

1.3. The spatialities of the research: why County Durham?

This section contextualises the research area of the project. It explores the unique socioeconomic geography and history of the county: a mix of urban and rural areas; deindustrialisation and the long terms effects of this; and austerity and its disproportionate cuts. This section thus addresses the spatial context and highlights my reasoning for the

focus on County Durham. Here, I begin to unpick my argument that geography matters to the experience and navigation of loneliness.

1.3.1. An overview of County Durham

County Durham³ is situated in the North East of England. It has a population of approximately 530, 000 (ONS, 2022) and constitutes a mix of urban and rural areas. There is one city, Durham, and fifteen towns: Consett, Barnard Castle, Peterlee, Seaham, Bishop Auckland, Newton Aycliffe, Middleton-in-Teesdale, Shildon, Chester-le-Street, Crook, Stanley, Stanhope, Spennymoor, Ferryhill, and Sedgefield. There are also multiple villages and hamlets. The county includes coastal and agricultural areas, and has strong coal mining, steel, railway, and agricultural heritage, which have helped shaped the culture and socioeconomic landscape of the county. I reflect on this more later in the section. While these industries traditionally dominated the economy, the Annual Population Survey (2020) reported that 82.4% of working people are now employed in service industries in County Durham.

28.8% of County Durham households are classed as “workless”, compared to the average in England of 27.3%. The county is ranked 26th most deprived area in England in terms of employment and 42nd in terms of income. 21% of households are living in relative poverty compared to the national average of 17%. 25% of those households living in poverty also have at least one working adult living there. Disabled people are also less likely to be employed, with only 47.2% of disabled people in County Durham working (Durham County Council Poverty Action Plan, 2022). According to the ONS, County Durham is also in the top 16% of most income deprived areas in England. Income deprivation refers to those who are out of work and on low earnings. 118 out of the 324 neighbourhoods in the county are within the top 20% most income deprived in England. 21% of jobs in the area pay below the minimum living wage, and disposable income remains lower in the county compared to the national average, as well as in comparison to the North East. Fuel poverty impacts 16% of

³ Here I am referring to County Durham as a district, which relates to the area that receives funding from local government. This felt more fitting when politicising the subject of loneliness in the county. County Durham can also be referred to as the ceremonial county, which encompasses a larger geographical area. 21 participants who were interviewed lived within County Durham district. One participant lived in Hartlepool, which is within the ceremonial area of County Durham. As I reflect in Chapter 3, recruitment was a difficult process, and when someone approached me to take part in the project who was from Hartlepool, I decided to include their experience within this project.

households. These conditions are only set to worsen as the post-pandemic landscape and cost-of-living crisis continues (Durham County Council Poverty Action Plan, 2022).

1.3.2. Shaping the uneven landscape of County Durham: deindustrialisation, disinvestment and austerity cuts

This broad and particularly bleak overview of County Durham has not occurred in a vacuum. The county's socioeconomic geography has played an important part in the unevenness the county experiences in relation to the rest of country. As highlighted above, the county has strong links to heavy industry, particularly coal mining and steelworks. British Steel at Consett provided 6,000 jobs at its peak in the 1960s. When the steelworks closed in September 1980, this caused a 35% unemployment rate in Consett (Co-curate Newcastle). As Hudson and Sadler (1989) argue, places like Consett are marked by unemployment and poverty. These issues continue to persist, with unemployment and limited opportunities enduring features of Consett's socioeconomic landscape (Moss, 2015).

The 19th century saw coal mining expand and transform the county's landscape, population, communities, and everyday life. Colliery villages materialized across the area, creating homes for miners and their families. In 1923, 170,000 miners were working and living in County Durham. The number of mines declined following the Second World War, but it still remained the primary economy in the area until the 1980s. When Thatcher's government considered mines unprofitable, the 1984-85 year-long miner's strike saw thousands of miners unpaid. The mining industry rapidly declined and the final coal mine in County Durham closed in 1994 (Durham Record Office). The relatively well-paid, unionised, male-dominated industry was mostly replaced by low-paid, often part-time work, concentrated in customer service and call centres (Bennett et al., 2001). The process of deindustrialisation therefore drastically changed the economic make-up of the county. As Bennett et al. (2001) state, this had a severe emotional and physical impact on the lives of ex-miners and their families, and areas like County Durham still encounter the scars of deindustrialisation today.

The inequalities and unevenness that resulted from deindustrialisation have only been exacerbated by decades of disinvestment, and austerity measures that have had a limiting and squeezing effect on the county's residents. Particularly since 2010, when the coalition-led government introduced austerity cuts, County Durham has unevenly encountered these measures in comparison to other areas within the UK. Jones (2022) notes that the North East

has received the smallest increase in expenditure per head in England. The South and South East have received the biggest increases. The North East has also seen the smallest expenditure on healthcare funding since 2008/09. In County Durham more specifically, Durham County Council received a 37.1% cut to the local government settlement fund. Properties in County Durham are also mostly in a lower tax band, which means the council is unable to recoup further finances from council tax. County Durham is therefore in the bottom 25% of areas raising funds through council tax (Jones, 2022).

These numbers and percentages have an everyday, emotional impact on the lives of those living in County Durham. Hall (2019: 204) argues that austerity has exacerbated existing inequalities and social differences. More than just impacting on the broader spending power of local authorities, austerity has affected the personal and relational lives of some of the most vulnerable in society. Further, austerity and its impacts reverberate across and through families, friendship groups, and communities.

In the context of County Durham, a broad picture of cuts can begin to map out how everyday life can be impacted by austerity measures. Every single library in the county has had its opening times reduced. Some libraries, such as Peterlee, has been relocated and now share its premises with the leisure centre. While it has not seen permanent closure of libraries, libraries often stand closed to the public, limiting the amount of time these spaces can be occupied by the local community. Hitchen's (2021) important work on austerity and public libraries highlights the everyday importance of using these spaces for local communities. Community centres and Sure Start⁴ centres also provide valuable care, support and wellbeing to those who use them (Jupp, 2013; 2019). Youth services, too, are invaluable to supporting young people (Horton, 2016). In County Durham, as of 2023, there are 19 Sure Start centres in the county. There used to be 43 (Durham County Council report, 2015). Community centres, like libraries, face reduced hours and the clubs and classes held in them are difficult to run regularly as they require funding. This ebbing and flowing of funding of community groups was particularly pertinent for the participants in this research.

Here, I argue that this context of living in County Durham, along with the temporal positioning of being a millennial, has potential to foster feelings of loneliness. A reduced

⁴ Sure Start centres were introduced by the Labour government in 1998. They are centres that aim to support families with children under 5, targeting the most disadvantaged areas.

access to healthcare, financial insecurity, fewer community spaces to *be*, and reduced community support all, I argue, create conditions where loneliness is likely to emerge. My definition of loneliness here is a social and spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state. When chronic underfunding to Durham County Council means that access to health and community services are limited, a strain is placed on an individual's ability to connect to others, as they are too *stretched* to prioritise their emotional and social wellbeing.

Next, I make some more personal reflections. As a millennial living in County Durham, I acknowledge both my positionality, as well as the temporal distance between proposing this research in 2016, and completing it in 2023.

1.4. A disrupted biography

As much as the above context has influenced my focus on millennials and County Durham when thinking about loneliness, it would be untrue to suggest that my own identity as a County Durham millennial had not shaped the project too. Anecdotally and personally, I had noticed loneliness – in the many, subjective ways it can be defined and understood – had crept into the everyday reflections and conversations with my friends and peers. I noticed this around 2015, but had not yet named this feeling and expression of loneliness. A lot of the conversations I had with others was about *not being good enough*, feeling like a failure, not wanting to see other people, feeling disconnected, feeling depressed, feeling worn down, missing the friendship and camaraderie of university or school. I started to think about this in terms of loneliness in 2016 following my Masters dissertation on the *Emotional Geographies of Graduates*. I then began this research in 2017. The ways in which my positionality as a County Durham millennial has influenced the project is reflected upon in Chapter 3. Here, however, I wanted to highlight how my own position feels as though it has been naturally woven into this project. It has seeped into the research design, data collection, conversations, reflections, analysis, and writing. My biography is therefore entangled in this thesis.

My own biography and personal life has also affected the timescale of this PhD. Over the last six years, I have cared for family members, been bereaved, had my daughter, and, like everyone else, encountered the disruptions, worry, and anxiety of Covid-19. My PhD journey has therefore felt like a constant series of stops and starts. When it came to analysis, I noticed that my participants appeared to have similarly disrupted biographies, for a number

of different and complex reasons. My own disruptions therefore led me to analyse and conceptualise loneliness in terms of a *disruption*.

This concept has largely been used to explore how chronic health conditions can be disruptive, throwing off the lifecourse (Bury, 1982). In reading around this subject, I was able to consider how this concept fitted with expectations of adulthood and everyday life. I understood this as relating to loneliness for this project's participants. For me, I could see it as a useful concept to not only understand the multiple personal disruptions I had faced, but also the disruptions of my PhD as a whole. This concept not only forms the focus of Chapter 4, it has also informed my own positionality, analysis, and writing. While I have felt frustrated, worried, and embarrassed by the time it has taken between the start and finish of this project, these disruptions have made this PhD what it is today.

Next, informed by the context highlighted in the sections above, I outline this project's research questions and aims.

1.5. Research questions

1. How do millennials live through and experience loneliness in a neoliberal society?
2. How does living in County Durham shape the experience of loneliness?

1.6. Research aims

- Take a critical generational approach to explore the context millennials have grown up and live within, shaping their everyday relationships and connections
- Use geographies of emotion, relationships and everyday life to understand millennial loneliness
- Use a feminist, phenomenological and relational theoretical framework to understand how identities, spaces and experiences are formed through interactions with others, and influence incidence of loneliness
- Interrogate the neoliberal understanding of adulthood and how individualised ideas of transitions to adulthood play out when considering loneliness

1.7. Thesis breakdown

Six chapters follow this one. In Chapter 2, I outline the conceptual framework, theoretical underpinnings, and existing literature that has helped inform and frame my research. Within

this chapter I highlight the gaps this thesis is placed within. My conceptual framework weaves together feminist, phenomenological and relational theories, and I outline how subjectivity, lived experience, situated knowledges, and relationships are at the core of my understanding and interpretation of loneliness. Emotional geographies, in particular, is where I position my interpretation of the social geography of loneliness. I understand unpicking loneliness here through a focus on everyday life, emotions and relationships. To do this, I engage with the youth transitions literature; the geographies and the sociology of relationships; imagined geographies of place; a sense of belonging in place; the politics and geographies of home; and the currently limited geographies of loneliness. I close the chapter with where my research sits, and how I will advance upon existing work.

Chapter 3 outlines the *doing* of this research, as I underline the ways I have crafted a feminist, phenomenological and relational methodology. I outline my methodology and research design, including ethics, recruitment, and an overview of the participants. I reflect on the methods in practice, and make reflections from the field and beyond. I also outline my own analytical framework and how I applied it here. This chapter embraces my positionality, worries, frustrations, and triumphs. I outline the journey this research has taken, and the often complex process of conducting research.

Chapter 4 is the first of my three analytical chapters. As I take a multi-scalar approach to loneliness, this chapter starts from the largest scale. Referred to as the macro scale, I draw on the ways decisions on the state level, as well as ingrained and normalised neoliberal values, can filter down and impact on feelings of loneliness. I conceptualise this in terms of disrupted biographies. I argue that a disrupted biography can result in feelings of loneliness. I do this in two ways. The first section of the chapter addresses the relationship between power and time. I draw on how financial insecurity, funding cuts, waiting lists, and the closure of spaces can leave people feeling unsupported and uncared for. This has the effect of disrupting biographies, leaving the participants feeling unable to *move on and* thus leaving little time to focus on wellbeing. I argue that loneliness is likely to emerge in these circumstances. The second part of the chapter draws on the social and cultural value of time. Here, I address the expected temporalities of adulthood, the role of heteronormativity, and the concept of neoliberal adulthood, to explore how some millennials feel *less than* if they are not achieving specific milestones. I critique these values, whilst also highlighting how loneliness can emerge in these feelings of failure.

Chapter 5 draws closer in on the meso scale. Here the meso scale refers to the hometown and local community of the participants. I draw on the ways County Durham is imagined in public and media discourse, and how a sense of broader cultural isolation can speak to feelings of personal isolation. This chapter also addresses the tension between solitude, privacy and loneliness. It explores how living in tight-knit communities, which are often presented as the panacea of loneliness, can instead be suffocating. This, I argue, links to feelings of loneliness and isolation. This chapter also takes a positive look upon feelings of community and connection on this scale. I argue that loneliness can also be *soothed* by kindness, connection, and care extended to individuals by their communities. This not only helps capture the complex emotional geographies of place, but helps me flesh out some policy recommendations I make in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6 explores loneliness on the intimate scale. I do this by engaging with the experience and navigation of loneliness within the domestic sphere. I also take an embodied approach, highlighting how loneliness is *felt*. There are three sections in this chapter. Firstly, I draw on the *crunch points* of loneliness. I argue that there are specific time-spaces that can become coded with feelings and expectations of connection. These can emerge from the broader heteronormative expectations of family and domestic life. I suggest that these time-spaces become charged with emotion, and loneliness can arise. Secondly, I understand loneliness as having a *stretching* and *shrinking* affect on time and space. I argue that it can manipulate an individual's everyday life, emotions and relationships. I draw on how structural inequalities can become embodied too, affecting time-spaces, and linking to feelings of loneliness. Finally, I explore the experience of loneliness in multigenerational homes. Here, I argue that a collision of generational norms and expectations can speak to loneliness being encountered within the domestic sphere.

I close this thesis with Chapter 7. This forms the discussion and conclusion portion of the research. Here, I tie the empirical chapters together, highlighting why taking a multi-scalar approach helps to flesh out an understanding of the geographies of loneliness. I argue that this has helped give a complex understanding of loneliness, and has both spatialised and politicised the topic. I also return to my research questions and aims, and highlight how each of the analytical chapters have contributed, and answered, what I have sought to learn through this research. I argue that this project has been an important piece of research in gaining a social and spatial understanding of loneliness. It is the first piece of work to take a

generational, multi-scalar approach, which innovatively weaves together the chosen theories, concepts, and ideas. It also makes policy recommendations, particularly in terms of how community spaces can be used to push back against feelings of loneliness. I close the chapter with recommendations for future research in the emerging field of geographies of loneliness.

Chapter 2. The Emotions, Relationships and Everyday Life of Millennials:

Framing the Research

This chapter sets out the existing conceptual and theoretical debates concerning emotions, everyday life, and the millennial generation, within geographical research, and the wider social sciences. Combining these strands highlights the gaps that this thesis seeks to fill, by deepening our understanding of the geography of loneliness for millennials living in County Durham. A multi-scalar approach reveals how relationships, place, and societal norms are interrelated. To do this, I tie together the following strands of literature, addressing the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *why* of this research.

I begin with Section 2.1, which outlines the feminist, phenomenological and relational conceptual framework within which I situate this research. Section 2.2 engages with literature on youth transitions, adulthood and the millennial generation, which gives the academic context to who I am focusing my research on. Section 2.3 looks closely at geographic and sociological work on relationships which, given the focus of the thesis, provides an element of what I am highlighting and gaining an understanding of. Section 2.4 explores the imagined geographies and sense of belonging in place. I then draw in closer to consider work that critically explores the home and domestic sphere in section 2.5. Each of these sections examines the where of this thesis. While County Durham is the wider geographical location and plays a crucial part in my understanding and approach to loneliness in this thesis – as highlighted in Chapter 1 – I seek to understand the lived and real experiences of loneliness that so often take place within the home and during mundane, everyday moments within personal geographies. In this sense, the case study and underpinning conceptual framing contribute insights for understanding and approaching loneliness everywhere. Section 2.6 engages with the discreet and emerging body of literature on the geographies of loneliness. I thus address the why of this thesis in this section and in the conclusion, where I tie together these strands of literature to highlight the gap this research sits within.

2.1. Geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships: conceptually framing the research

Human Geography takes seriously the socio-spatial realities, lived experience, situated knowledges, inequalities, and connections that will enable me to explore the geographies of

loneliness of millennials in County Durham. To do this, I pull together three interrelated theoretical and conceptual strands that help shine a light on this relatively unexplored subject area. I situate this research within a feminist, phenomenological and relational framework, all approaches that have made valuable contributions to the discipline's understanding and approach to everyday life, emotion, and relationships, themes that I place at the core of my understanding of loneliness. Taking inspiration from, and building on, Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology and the cultural politics of emotion; Lauren Berlant and their understanding of political affects, heteronormativity and intimacies; Cindi Katz's minor theory; and Doreen Massey's work on relational space and power geometries; I thread together the ideas of these key theorists to inform my approach to the geographies of loneliness. The following three sections will consider each approach in turn, fleshing out the conceptual framing of this project. To begin, I will engage with the feminist approach to the project, this will be followed by sections on the phenomenological and relational approach.

2.1.1. A feminist approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships

Human Geography has been charged historically with being a traditionally masculinist discipline, with a focus on the objective, quantifiable and public spatialities, that fails to address the diverse, uneven and rich realities of those who are not white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual (Rose, 1993). Critique is both in terms of the researcher and researched: the narrow focus of research interest meant that topics such as the everyday, emotions and relationships, remained unexplored and regarded as not robust or important enough for geographical attention. Feminist geographers have made important and radical changes to the discipline, demonstrating the ways that Human Geography's socio-spatial approach can not only help gain unique understanding of lesser explored topics such as domestic life, intimacies, emotions, but such topics could also speak to, and open a richer understanding of socio-economic and political life.

By incorporating the values of feminist theory and applying a feminist epistemology in geography, my research approach and design emphasise subjectivity and inequalities. This is something I take seriously in this project. I am motivated by the quest to challenge how inequalities and an uneven socio-economic geography in County Durham contributes to experiences of loneliness. Because loneliness is so often perceived as private and stigmatised, a subjective approach is required that listens directly to participant testimonies. This approach values the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of County Durham millennials

as experts in their subjective experience of loneliness. This project also takes inspiration from Cindi Katz's (1996; 2017) "minor theory". This is a subversion from "mastery" in dominant theoretical approaches. It consciously engages with displacement. To be displaced is to allow for new spatialities, temporalities and subjectivities to emerge in the spaces of betweenness, highlighting the limits of 'major' theories and approaches. For this project, it means embracing the complex and subjective, and valuing the situated knowledge of the participants. It means accepting the contradictions, intricacies, and unexpected narratives of loneliness that I am presented with. As Katz (2017; 598) writes, I recognise that "those subjectivities, spatialities, temporalities are embodied, situated and fluid; their productions of knowledge inseparable from – if not completely absorbed in – the mess of everyday life." By taking this approach, I reveal 'cracks' in dominant understandings of loneliness. I present new ways to think about, research, and approach the subject of loneliness generally, and geographies of loneliness more specifically.

While Feminist Geography has allowed for a sharper focus on relationships and everyday life in human geography, here I want to focus specifically on emotions and affects, which feminist geography has demonstrated as valuable to the discipline. In Chapter 1 I outlined how loneliness is broadly defined. In this research it is understood as something that is subjective that can be intangible and unnamed: it is something that is felt, whether it is initially understood as loneliness or not by the subject. It is therefore clear that emotional and affectual geographies inform a core part of this project's conceptual framework, helping to make sense of, and unpick, the complexity and messiness of human feeling.

For Anderson and Smith (2001), the study of emotion allows geography to maintain its critical edge, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the world around us, arguing that social relations are lived through the emotions we embody. Emotions can also shape the spaces we encounter and the time we experience, with Davidson and Milligan (2004) noting that our feelings are constantly (re)shaping one's sense of self, as well as our sense of being-in-the-world. I therefore apply these concepts of emotion to this project, aiming to explore how emotion manipulates, transforms, expands, shrinks, stops, an individual's sense of space and time. Work on emotional geographies also closely connects to the sub-discipline of embodied geographies. This work gives a socio-spatial understanding to the ways bodies can be layered with social, cultural and political meanings; how these layers can be internalised; and how emotions can be expressed on, and within, this embodied scale (Colls, 2006; Colls

and Evans, 2009; Longhurst, 2001; 2008; Parr, 1998; 2002; Teather, 1999). How the participants feel, how emotions are embodied, and the narration of emotion and loneliness in their life stories, is at the forefront of my conceptual and methodological approach. By positioning my research within an emotional geographies framework I take seriously the ways in which emotion speaks to wider social relations, structures, and inequalities, giving a fuller picture of the time-spaces that loneliness can emerge.

Within the discipline, there has been lively debate between the application, use, and conceptual understanding of emotion and affect. Broadly, it is understood that emotion relates to a named, conscious feeling that an individual expresses, whereas an affect is non-representational, sitting below consciousness and beyond reflectivity (Anderson, 2009; Davidson et al., 2007; Pile, 2009). For Thien (2005) the use of affectual geography is merely another way to produce a binary, with emotion being seen as too messy, subjective, feminine. In this critique, affect returns to a masculinist and objective approach in human geography. While I appreciate this viewpoint, and I align this research with emotional geography by taking the named motions of participants seriously, I do utilise some elements of affectual geography in this thesis. Like Pile (2009), I see value in tracing the similarities between emotion and affect; noting that neither are fixed and are fluid, and that the study of emotion and affect privileges proximity and intimacy. Further, the concept of affective atmospheres will also be drawn upon, which Anderson (2009) argues helps overcome this collision between emotion and affect. An affective atmosphere relates to a spatiality in which affects circulate, move, transform, affect those within this atmosphere. Within these atmospheres there can be a collective feeling, yet individual and subjective expressions of emotion. Closs Stephens (2016) presents the example of the London 2012 Olympics Ceremony, presenting a collective, affective sense of nationalism, yet depending on the positionality and life experience of an individual, this could be emotively expressed in a multitude of ways. Hitchen (2021) builds on this concept by suggesting that there is a temporality as well as a spatiality to affective atmospheres. In Hitchen's work on austerity and public libraries, it was found that while there was a collective sense and experience of austerity, these were individually expressed and experienced in diverse ways.

This spatiality and temporality of affective atmospheres will be applied in this research. As I outlined in Chapter 1, the unique social geography of County Durham, and the temporality of being a young adult part of the millennial generation, presents a unique time-space in which

I approach the experience of loneliness. However, given the coincidence of being a millennial in County Durham, this time-space is encountered in a multitude of deeply personal and diverse ways. The individual expressions of emotion differ. The conceptual framing of emotion and affect is therefore twofold. Firstly, I privilege the named and subjective expressions of emotion as I conduct life story interviews and embrace the participants' lived experiences in gaining a deep understanding of loneliness. Secondly, I embrace this idea that there is a temporality and spatiality to the affective atmosphere that encompasses millennials in County Durham. I trace this through my exploration of young adulthood and the sense of place and connection that participants have to the area in which they live. In doing so, I aim to gain an understanding of the mood that surrounds their everyday life, leading to the ways they express themselves emotionally, and specifically in terms of how they experience loneliness.

Another way in which affect will be applied in this thesis is connected to Lauren Berlant's work on political affects. Berlant draws on the ways that subjects can be affectively manipulated and conditioned to feel certain things and act in certain ways. Specifically, I draw on Berlant's (2011) theory of cruel optimism, which argues that neoliberal narratives of upward mobility, success, and aspiration, become relationally bound and embraced by individuals. This relationship to the idea of success helps make sense of the world and gives a sense of security in what to expect, hope, strive for, and move towards. This is considered "cruel optimism" because this affective connection to the relationship of subjective actions leading to personal, neoliberal success is *empty*, in that many individuals are not sufficiently endowed socially, economically and financially to achieve this optimistic goal. Politically affective goals highlight governmental narratives and neoliberal discourse that incite feelings of responsibility, aspiration, shame, and self-blame. Behind this empty rhetoric, the government fail to enable all members of society to achieve a sense of financial security, economic stability, and emotional wellbeing.

Cruel optimism is an important concept to take forward into this research. Markers of neoliberal success are particularly potent for the participants due to their life stage and geographical positioning. Financial success, employment, home ownership, detachment from the state, are not only objects of aspiration in neoliberal society, but also, they are expectations and markers of adulthood. Given that the millennials in this research are young adults of working age, these narratives of success influence and shape their sense of being-

in-the-world. Further, as introduced in Chapter 1, County Durham has a unique socio-economic geography. There is an unevenness in terms of employment and opportunities in the county. This double bind of being a working age adult in a region that has fewer opportunities, while also living in a society that promotes individualism and personal responsibility, therefore speaks to Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. I take this idea forward in the thesis, and it adds to my conceptual framing of the project, as I also seek to understand how affects are political, inciting very real, habitual, and enduring emotions in the participants of this project.

2.1.2. A phenomenological approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships

A phenomenological approach coincides with the intentions of this research to value subjectivity, direct experience, personal accounts, and to consciously reflect on everyday life and one's sense of being in the world. Specifically, I utilise the concept of the "lifeworld", which is the spatial-temporal setting of everyday life, that is culturally and personally defined (Buttmer, 1976). Utilising the lifeworld as a concept enables me to explore consciously encountered emotions, relationships and everyday life, as well as how participants' experiences influence how they navigate loneliness. As discussed above, to gain an understanding of one's lifeworld, I will tease out the emotional geographies and emotional experiences that take place in the spatial-temporal affective atmosphere of being a millennial in County Durham. Phenomenology therefore values lived experience, which privileges personal knowledge and first-hand accounts of phenomena, which is, again, a core concept in the approach of this thesis to understand the geographies of loneliness.

As Pickles (1987) argues, lived experience and individual lifeworlds are never entirely detached from structural constraints, and I therefore take the personal accounts, and the lived experience, of millennials in County Durham as a starting point. Developing these observations, I seek to flesh out, understand, and critically explore the ways in which the macro scale – the governmental decisions, austerity measures, socio-economic geography of County Durham – further shape the lifeworlds of the respondents in this study.

I draw particular inspiration from Sara Ahmed's work. She presents a queer phenomenological approach, that offers a framework in which to conceptualise the ways loneliness can emerge in those lifeworlds that do not *fit*. Much like Berlant's work on cruel optimism, Ahmed (2004: 12) suggests that a focus on emotion highlights the ways in which

subjects become so invested in certain structures that “their demise is felt as a kind of living death”. Therefore, for Ahmed (2004), emotion provides a “script”, and to align oneself with this script, this socially mediated set of emotions and life choices, is to become “us” and not “them”. To not adhere to these emotional scripts is to be othered due to falling out of “line” with social norms surrounding emotional responses. Ahmed (2010) demonstrates this further in *The Promise of Happiness*, arguing that happiness can be earned by living life in the ‘right’ way and directing oneself towards specific life choices, and not others. These ideas have therefore been woven into my conceptual framework as I uncover the ways that emotion is not only expressed, but utilised, in relation to social norms, expectations, and life choices.

Ahmed’s (2006) work on orientation and disorientation in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* provides a useful language for this thesis. I use the concept of (dis)orientation to examine the disrupted biographies of millennials at multiple scales within the research. Ahmed (2006) argues that if we are orientated, we may not realise, and that it is only when we are disorientated and unfamiliar, that this disorientation, this difference, becomes clear. Ahmed notes that some bodies are more easily accepted and orientated in space than others. Specific connection is made to how queer people reject the “scripts” or “lines” of an expected, heteronormative life (Berlant and Warner, 1998). I also utilise Ahmed’s concept of lines and how they direct us. These lines are the directions, the paths, that are taken through life, and are made through repetition. The more they are repeated, the clearer these lines become. Following these lines therefore orientates the subject towards those who have followed these lines before, while also providing company and solidarity with the ones who follow these lines simultaneously. When these lines have been made repeatedly before, a future becomes tangible, and there is a sense of orientation, a comfort, a feeling of belonging within one’s own lifeworld and one’s surroundings. This concept is useful to this research, and I will repeatedly return to the idea of being (dis)orientated. I will attempt to understand how an individual’s emotions, relationships, and everyday life are navigated alongside dominant emotional scripts, and the ways in which (dis)orientation can play a pivotal role in the subjective experience of loneliness. I therefore take a queer phenomenological approach, and while I do apply this in relation to a participant’s sexual and gender identity, I also take queer, in this sense, to relate to anyone who does not feel orientated. I take the intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) of the

participants into account when I seek understanding of their lifeworlds and geographies of loneliness.

2.1.3. A relational approach: geographies of everyday life, emotion and relationships

This conceptual framework also incorporates a relational ontology, which is defined by Mauthner and Doucet (1998) as drawing attention to socially located individuals, as well as the duality between socio-economic structures and personal agency. Relationships are therefore at the centre of concerns, and the interrelations between subjects and objects at multiple sites and scales are considered crucial to the understanding of everyday life.

Thinking relationally about everyday life also aids the challenge of exploring the tension between structure and agency. This is particularly important in this project as I not only value lived experience, situated knowledge, and subjective, named emotions and experiences, I also critically engage with the wider structures on the macro scale that inhibit and constrain individual lifeworlds. Incorporating a relational ontology into my conceptual framework therefore gives me the tools to hold structure and agency together, avoiding applying too much personal agency, or being too deterministic, in my analysis and discussion of the life stories in this research.

Doreen Massey's (1991; 2005) work on relational space is applied here in my understanding of relational geography, as well as how I explore the ways in which participants in this project engage with the spaces around them and their sense of place. For Massey, space is a product of interrelations that are made through interactions and is constantly being (re)produced and (re)constructed. This occurs at multiple scales, from the global to the intimate, and is a constellation of multiple trajectories and relationships coming together. There is a politics to this, in what Massey theorises as "power geometries". This relates to the ways in which space is encountered in different and diverse ways by a multitude of individuals. It is within these power geometries of space that inequalities and an unevenness can be found, highlighting the multiple variables that relate to one another and create both space and the subjective experience of it.

Morrison et al. (2012: 513) argue that relational space is the "relations and spaces between and among individuals, groups and objects", and that space is therefore created through, between and by relationships. Hall (2019) builds on both Massey and Morrison et al.'s work to present an understanding of everyday life that is not bound to place, and instead views

everyday life as relational space, with the relational geographies of family, friendships and intimacies, being used to conceptualise everyday geographies of austerity. I adopt this approach in my research, exploring the power geometries of relational space, and the ways that relationships produce a space which is not place bound. I build on this by questioning what happens where there are no relationships, or relationships have been altered, or there is a desire for a relationship where there is not one. I thus conceptualise a relational geography of loneliness. In doing this I not only centre the role of relationships – or lack of – in the research, I also develop an understanding of space that is made, manipulated, stretched, shrunk, and (re)produced by the presence of loneliness in an individual's everyday life. By weaving this concept into my wider conceptual framework, I am able to interrogate the geographies of loneliness by gaining an understanding of how spaces produce loneliness, and how loneliness produces space.

2.1.4. Bringing the strands of the conceptual framework together

I have brought together feminist, phenomenological and relational geographies to form the conceptual framework for my research. This is because they each have uniting qualities that speak to the three core themes of my research: everyday life, emotions, and relationships. Each of these themes help interrogate the geographies of loneliness of millennials in County Durham, by revealing the realities and lived experience of their lifeworlds in which they encounter loneliness. By applying a feminist epistemology, I embrace the value of situated knowledges and subjectivities in my pursuit of understanding the subject matter. I also take seriously the ways in which inequalities can inform the experience of loneliness, and thus felt that feminist geography was crucial in the design of my conceptual framework. Feminist geography can also be credited with the entry of emotion into the discipline, and as this provides such an important part of conceptual framework and overall understanding of loneliness, it was important to credit a feminist approach to emotion in geography.

Emotional geography and the articulation and consciously experienced emotions play important role in this framework. As with the phenomenological approach, it emphasises subjective lived experience. Drawing on the spatialities and temporalities of affective atmospheres, I fold in a queer phenomenological approach, and engage particularly with the concept of (dis)orientation, to deepen my understanding of the mood of the research area and context. This helps frame my understanding of the ways that norms, expectations and overarching emotional scripts can affect the everyday life, emotions and relationships of

millennials, perhaps promoting feelings of loneliness. Finally, I draw on relational geographies, seeking to understand how relationships make the spaces my participants encounter, as well as the ways their relationships produce space. I offer my own concept of relational geographies of loneliness, that interrogates how an absence of a relationship, or a feeling of loneliness, can manipulate, alter, shrink and stretch the time-space and lifeworld of an individual.

The following sections engage with the literature exploring the *who*, *what*, *where* and *why* of the research. Next, I will turn to the existing literature on youth transitions, critically engaging with, and advancing on, this body of literature to explore *who* is the focus of this research.

2.2. Youth transitions, adulthood and the millennial generation

This section helps interrogate the *who* that are the focus of this thesis. While Chapter 1 presented the context of *who* millennials are, and why I focused on this generation in my research, this section gives academic context to the generation that can sometimes be slippery to define. Millennials are the generation born roughly between the early 1980s and late 1990s, and at the time that this research was carried out, they are broadly considered as young adults. To gain an understanding of *who* millennials are and how this life stage is engaged with in the academic literature, I turn attention to the youth transitions literature. This body of literature, situated in geography and sociology, unpicks the expectations, norms and life stages that are associated with being an adult. I pull together ideas surrounding expectations of adulthood, (in)dependence and interdependencies, temporalities of adulthood, and disrupted biographies. I do this to contextualise how adulthood is imagined and (re)produced across time and space, and to critically assess the emotions and affects that are associated with not meeting these expectations. To begin, I engage with literature on generations and the relationality of age, to acknowledge how I approach the millennial generation.

Wyn and Woodman (2006: 497) argue that each generation is located within its own “social, political and economic milieu”. The study of specific generations can aid youth researchers assess the ways in which structural changes and historically specific temporalities can influence the experiences, lifestyles, employment and relationships of a specific age group (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). While this approach can be useful to

map out socio-economic changes, there is a risk of being too deterministic in the suggestion that individuals who share a similar temporal positionality will have the same experiences, or that they are unable to employ any personal agency in their life choices (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). Care also needs to be taken not to assume that generations are rigid categories which exist independently from one another, and that each generation holds contained values which are separate from one another.

Relationships between generations are not fixed, and extend, expand, and retreat between generations in a multitude of ways. This can be exemplified by the relationships between adult children and their parents, where the dependency/independency relationship between parent and child shifts across time and, for some, is remade as an interdependent relationship (Evans, 2008; Holdsworth, 2007). While I recognise the risks of taking a generational approach in this research, I have chosen to focus on the millennial generation in a specific spatial location as I do still see value in attempting to understand how the temporalities that these young adults have grown up and live within has altered their experience of adulthood and everyday life.

To avoid an essentialising discourse when talking about the millennial generation, I draw on the work of Hopkins and Pain (2007) to think about age relationally. This work understands age as being produced and reproduced through intergenerational and intersectional relations, highlighting how fluid and changeable age can be.

Hopkins and Pain (2007) focus on two intertwined concepts of intergenerationality and intersectionality to articulate the fluidity and complexity of age. Intergenerationality defines the interactions and relations between generational identity groups. Individuals are typically united by *sameness* to others in their generational group, as well as an *otherness* to those in another generation. These social identities are not fixed and are variable in accordance to situated contexts, yet the idea that they are based on a sameness and otherness suggests that these identities are produced through interactions with other generations.

Intersectionality similarly describes how social differences interact to produce variable experiences for individuals. It questions what else an individual can be, rather than just focusing on their generation and age. Hopkins and Pain suggest that by bringing age into thinking about intersectionality, questions can be asked about multiple factors that influence a person's identity and everyday experiences.

These ideas of intergenerationality and intersectionality are advanced in this project. When building a picture of a participant's lifeworld through life story interviews, I pay attention to the intergenerational relationships that they navigate within their personal communities. As Richardson (2016) argues in his work on intergenerational relationships, there is value in considering how intergenerational relationships and family dynamics can influence personal perceptions and values. This is something I build on in my conversations with millennials about their relationships, everyday life and emotions. Further, I draw on how intersectionality is key to understanding the relationality of age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007), as I explore the complexities and life circumstances of each of my participants in understanding their geographies of loneliness.

2.2.1. Transitions and expectations of adulthood

As already stated, at the time this research was conducted, the millennial generation are young adults. This life stage is attached to several milestones, expectations and norms that are broadly conceived as being indicators that adulthood has been reached. In taking a lifecourse approach, which describes the structures and sequences of events and transitions throughout an individual's life (Bailey, 2009; Elder, 1985), it is possible to not only trace these expectations, but also understand how they can become altered by the spatial-temporal context of a generation. In what follows, I draw on the shifting norms of pathways to adulthood. I engage with the pervasiveness of the neoliberal adulthood ideal, which sits in the background of the millennial generation's temporal context.

In youth transition research, the transitional journey was traditionally captured by focusing on the movement from school to the workplace (Pollock, 2002; 2008; Valentine, 2003). By conceptualising youth transitions in this way, the journey to adulthood was understood in very linear terms, with a start and end point clearly defined. This linear pathway also assumed a standardized route to adulthood that followed an equivalent course to previous generations and others in the community. Transitions were therefore viewed collectively, and the experiences of youth and adulthood were socially situated and grounded in place (Furlong, 2013; Morrow and Richards, 1996). This meant that these standardised transitions were classed, and any socioeconomic changes, which impacted employment, meant transitions to adulthood were considered halted, paused, extended, or broken (Furlong, 2013). Such narratives around adulthood transitions therefore linked the idea of

employment and adulthood firmly together, suggesting that an individual was somehow less of an adult, if they were unable to gain employment.

Youth researchers challenge the notion that entry into the workplace defines youth transitions. Coles (1995) introduced the idea that young people undergo multiple transitions, which are interrelated and influence one another. As well as the transition from school to work, Coles (1995) suggested that young people also experience a housing transition in which a person moves from their family home to their own home, and a family transition where they move from their family of origin to a family of destination. Again, while this idea expands on the rigid understanding of adulthood, it retains a problematic linearity and standardisation of milestones. Further, it makes narrow assumptions about how adulthood is navigated. It privileges a heteronormative, economically stable version of adulthood that is arguably unrepresentative and deterministic. This narrow view has been challenged by the introduction of poststructuralist thought into the social sciences.

The ideas of Giddens (1990; 1991) and Beck (1992) influenced how youth transitions were understood. Rather than viewing young people and their extended transitions as a function of external structures, they viewed transitions as being infused with agency and choice. Late modernity is understood through a society moving away from traditional, collectivist, neighbourly norms, towards those which are increasingly individualised. People appear to be no longer confined by gender, class, institutional norms, and place. These wider economic changes and social reflexivity is understood to have also influenced people on an individual level, prompting critics to raise concerns that individuals are expected to navigate structural challenges as a private, solo endeavour. Further, this self-reflexivity means that individuals are constantly addressing and readdressing how they approach their personal biographies and lifestyles, seeing life as a “project” which is fluid and manageable, whilst also having a less concrete understanding of family, employment, and community (Cieslik and Pollock, 2002). This contrasts with earlier ideas around approaches to personal life and transitions. It no longer assumes a linear path that coincides with the expectations of family and community, nor is it so strongly linked with ideas around school to work transitions.

France (2007) sees the “life project”, which is geared towards adulthood, as linked to markers of adulthood status rather than just being employment based. These markers are linked to financial stability, home ownership, regular travel, consumerism, constant reassessment of

their career path, spending longer in training and higher education, and engaging in relationships which are geared around individual benefits and pleasure. For du Bois-Reymond (1998) this represents a switch from a “normal biography” to a “choice biography”. To follow a normal biography is to adhere to the linear understanding of adulthood, where one achieves certain milestones which are understood as the norm and follows a path that is predetermined and similar to previous generations. A choice biography is the ability to have further options and choose a lifestyle and path through life on an individual, as opposed to collective, level. Young people are therefore understood to have greater agency and choice in selecting their path towards adulthood, making numerous decisions about further education, careers, relationships and where to live.

The work on youth transitions explored so far has broadly focused on the realms of structure and agency that steer a young person’s entry into adulthood. While earlier work was critiqued for denying the agency of young people, the influence of poststructuralist thought was critiqued for ignoring wider societal processes (Furlong, 2013). Furlong and Cartmel (1997) introduce the concept of “epistemological fallacy” which refers to how young people believe they can choose their path through life but are inevitably structured and held back by wider factors such as class, race, gender, the current labour market, and place. This belief in being in control of one’s own transition to adulthood, despite wider structures at play, means that young people are made to feel in control of their own destinies and that with sheer effort and determination, they can be successful in achieving their aspirations (Pimlott-Wilson, 2015). Therefore, in feeling that they have greater options to choose and navigate their path to adulthood, a ‘failure’ to achieve their aspirations means that the individual directs the blame at themselves. It is the sense that they may feel that the ‘incorrect’ pathway has been chosen, or that they have not worked hard enough, and therefore believe that they are solely responsible for their own destiny, feeling anxious or frustrated at the decisions they have made (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Pollock, 2008). This connects to Berlant’s (2011) concept of cruel optimism, as individuals invest their time and energy into a specific set of aspirations or *end goal*, despite this being detrimental to their wellbeing.

I interrogate this idea of having a paused or failed transition by drawing on the concept of disrupted biographies. This concept usually explores how chronic health conditions are seen as a disruptive “event” which redirects, throws off course, and alters an individual’s lifecourse (Bury, 1982). Here, I use this idea of a disrupted biography to interrogate how the spatial-

temporal context of millennials in County Durham, as well as the overarching social and cultural norms that are attached to young adulthood, can lead to biographical disruptions. Further, I build on Thomson et al.'s (2008) concept of critical moments. A critical moment is an event in a young person's life that is deemed significant and that may have changed the course of young person's life and transitional experience. The authors took a similar experience shared by three young people from different backgrounds and explored how each of them responded to this critical moment. Three respondents had their school education threatened for a variety of reasons. Thomson et al. (2008) found that each respondent had overcome this critical moment in a different way, explained by their material circumstances. The young person who was from a middle-class background was able to navigate the experience more effectively and it did not have as much of a negative and lasting impact as it did on the young person from a more insecure and deprived background. It is therefore the response to such events, rather than the events themselves, that had a profound impact on the young person's lifecourse. By having more resources, a young person is more able to safeguard against some of the more negative circumstances that a critical moment may introduce. I, too, adopt this concept and conceptualise it as a *crunch point*. Here, a crunch point is taken to mean the ways an individual responds to a life event, and the resources they have, as well the disruptive quality it may have in redirecting or pausing the feeling of moving towards the standard of adulthood that is expected in neoliberal society.

What I want to do here, then, is to pull together colliding ideas of structure and agency in the navigation towards adulthood. My focus on County Durham means that much of my research area is on working-class communities, and I am interested in Silva's (2013: 59) assertion that working-class young people are "trapped between the rigidity of the past and the flexibility of the present". I thus draw on the ways that the spatial context of the millennials, specifically the uneven socioeconomic geography of County Durham, speaks to the narratives of flexibility and choice that sits in the background of the millennial generation's progression through the lifecourse. I unpick the emotions of this (Pimlott-Wilson, 2015) and the tensions between structure and agency for the young adults in this project. I do this by applying the concepts of disrupted biographies and crunch points. Further, I use my conceptual framework, observing the inequalities and intersectionalities of the respondents; and by taking a queer phenomenological approach, drawing on the ways the millennials are (dis)orientated in their experience and navigation of adulthood. I, too, will think about this

relationally, drawing on the relationality of age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007), as well how emotions and relationships – to others and to the self – shape, make, and alter the spaces they inhabit and the lifeworlds they live within.

2.2.2. *(In)dependence and the 'good' neoliberal adult*

The category of adulthood is also connected to the idea of being independent. This refers to the idea that adulthood is the *end goal* directing all life choices, experiences, and milestones. Dependency is thus linked to childhood, whilst independency is linked to adulthood. It is assumed that being dependent is only acceptable in childhood and that to be considered a 'proper' and respected adult in society is to ensure that one is independent. The independency/dependency divide can act as an exclusionary discourse as it infantilises people who are in the 'right' age range to be considered an adult but seen to be lacking in the sense that they are not navigating adulthood correctly. This is particularly true when considering adults who are on welfare benefits and are dependent on the state for support (Macleavy, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Adults who are financially independent are seen as good citizens and those who are dependent are demonised. Further, this creation of an image of what it means to be the 'right' kind of adult highlights that the milestones and qualities a young person needs to achieve and transition towards is set up as a very particular 'type' of adult. Specifically, the type of adulthood that is acceptable is one which is detached from the state, financially stable and, ultimately, middle class (Hardgrove et al., 2014).

Not only is dependency demonised, the blame for claiming benefits or not reaching so-called adulthood milestones is placed upon the individual themselves. This removes culpability from the state and frames unemployment and financial instability as being a result of laziness, as opposed to a lack of well paid, secure jobs, as well as the uneven development of the UK economy. Further, young people whose parents are unemployed are framed as inheriting a culture of worklessness from previous generations, blaming an inability to correctly transition on the parents. Macdonald and Shildrick (2018) explore this in their research on youth transitions in Teesside. In talking to the young people of their study they found that the respondents often shared the same aspirations as many other young people, namely having a job, being financially secure and owning a home. They found no evidence that they had inherited a belief that depending on the state was a desired path through life. Rather, the study drew on the significance of the area they lived, where many young people

were caught in a low pay, no pay cycle. This is a result of increasing unemployment and the decline of the industrial sector, as well as a reflection of the unevenness of the UK economy with waves of investment in some UK areas and not others.

As much as this reflects the ways in which wider structures impact on youth transitions, whilst also highlighting that young people still have the hope and drive to find secure employment, it also highlights the way adulthood is understood in very particular terms. Namely, it is not that youth transitions can be influenced by structures such as class, but also that adulthood is measured against middle class ideals. Further, adulthood is understood by the relationships young adults have to others. I explore the elements of neoliberal adulthood, relationship expectations and heteronormativity later within this chapter.

2.2.3. Critical temporalities of adulthood

This section draws on the temporal expectations of adulthood. While it has been established above that transitions to adulthood are multiple and diverse, there is still much to be said about the ways that ideas around adulthood continue to be pervasive and expected. In particular, the order and timeframes in which certain milestones are reached (if at all) have an affective influence on those living with, and within, these societal norms. Wanka (2010) uses the term “chronormativity” to address this. Chronormativity is a concept that highlights how social practices, such as what someone does, when, who with, and how, is assumed to be ‘achieved’ at specific temporal moments across an individual’s lifecourse. These practices are bolstered by being repetitively performed and creating a social norm. These chronormative expectations and norms can take place at multiple scales and sites, either through economic and political decisions and reform, or at the more intimate, domestic scale. This concept can therefore be usefully applied to a number of diverse contexts, as it captures the multiple realities of an individual encountering chronormative practices. There is thus an unevenness to how these temporalities are experienced and negotiated.

Sharma (2014) uses Massey’s concept of power geometries to consider how time is permeated with power. As well as understanding space as something that is not fixed or concrete, that the same physical environment can be moved through and experienced differently by different people, time, too, can be theorised in this way. For Sharma (2014), this enables some people to enjoy and embrace time as they appreciate the luxury of waiting and being on pause, at the expense of other people’s hard labour. This can be exemplified by

the service industry, where those with the financial means are able to purchase leisure time, while those facilitating this are working hard in exchange for a wage. The same moments are thus lived and felt in disparate and uneven ways.

Olsen (2015) expands on this idea by arguing that there is a hierarchy of time, which highlights how time, and the way it is encountered, reveals inequalities in terms of who matters and who does not. This is explored within the context of waiting as a temporality. For example, when considering waiting times and waiting lists for access to health care, there is an implicit understanding about who deserves urgency, and who is expected to wait. Those with power and finance can jump this queue of medical significance to purchase prioritisation. Those who do not are expected to wait and endure. As Olsen (2015: 522) writes, “waiting can therefore function as a potentially important spatial technology of the elite and powerful”. For Hage (2009) this is conceptualised as “stuckedness”. Hage (2009) draws on how a “viable life” (or one which is valued and celebrated) is connected to being mobile. This mobility can be in the physical sense, either through migration or travel, or in an existential sense, where an individual feels as though they are “going somewhere” or moving forward in their life. There is a sense that life is on the “right track”, which links back to the chrononormative expectations of adulthood, and speaks to both privilege and ideas around what type of adulthood is considered acceptable.

Jeffrey (2008) draws on the feeling of chronic waiting. While physical time moves forward, a person can feel “left behind” if their circumstances do not feel resolved or if there is a lack of urgency. The political narrative of ‘left behind places’ is explored in section 2.4.1, but here I consider it in terms of adulthood temporalities. This sense of waiting while everyone and everything continues, connects to the socio-economic and political norms that became attached to youth and adulthood in the 19th and 20th Century (Jeffrey, 2008: 955). These norms were linked to educational and work “careers” that were gendered and temporally situated (Cole and Durham, 2007). This meant that for those whose personal biographies did not map onto these temporal expectations, they were seen as lacking. This connects with narratives of aspiration and responsibility discussed above. Lacking can be internalised as being the fault of the individual, rather than the limiting spatial and temporal conditions. This enhances these feelings of being left behind. Further, Jeffrey (2008) argues that neoliberal economic reforms, which limit investment in social welfare and transfer responsibility from state to individual, result in a state of chronic waiting. This leaves people

waiting for basic necessities such as food, shelter and healthcare. Kiely (2021) explores this temporal element in his work examining waiting lists in healthcare after over a decade of austerity. Kiely argues that governmental policies have led to circumstances where this chronic waiting for appropriate healthcare is “disguised” by the movement or motion of transferring or discharging patients from one service to another. This can result in the feeling of being trapped in a “holding pattern” with little prospect of receiving healthcare any sooner. Kiely’s work helps demonstrate the way time is manipulated and affectively experienced, particularly by powerful structures and state actions. This explains how for some young people everyday life is temporally structured and subjectively experienced.

In effect, some realities of adulthood arise for individuals, while the same are shut down for others (Bastian et al., 2020). This can be understood in terms of how time is spent, such as the spaces an individual inhabits, but also in terms of the ability for young people to reach so-called adulthood milestones. Specifically, in the context of this thesis, gaining financial stability, employment, and encountering certain types of relationships that are normalised by our heteronormative, couple-centric society.

Lahad’s (2017) work highlights the ways in which time can also become infused with gendered and cultural expectations. In her work, she explores the ways in which women are held to specific temporal expectations, which are mostly linked to relationships, age and fertility. Lahad explores this through the lens of singlehood and in the context of Israel, tying together ideas around continuity, change, transition and tradition. She argues that the experience of being single can vary along the axes of social differentiation, and thus needs to be approached from a feminist, intersectional point of view. This work is therefore valuable when exploring the role of personal relationships and everyday life and emotion shaped by societal expectations. Using queer theory, Lahad draws on Berlant and Warner’s (1998: 548) definition of heteronormativity to make sense of the expectations placed on single women as “the privileging of heterosexual and familial bonds as the proactive force of structuring normative understandings about single women and aging.” Lahad argues that these dominant perceptions of heteronormative society lead to overbearing expectations around collective clocks, schedules, timetables and the temporal make-up of social life. These temporal expectations are strongly associated with marriage and child-bearing, and at particular ages and stages. There is the sense that with marriage brings a transition from “problematic single” to “acceptable married woman” and that “couplehood and family life

represent the promise that order, coherence, and meaning will be bestowed upon one's life trajectory, while singlehood is stripped of such, leading one to social isolation and loneliness" (p.64). This is not only internalised, but also externally re(produced), with society feeling more comfortable being able to categorise and see a sense of order in other people's everyday lives and personal relationship.

These ideas are advanced in work on 'compulsory coupledness' (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Ramdas, 2012; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Wilkinson, 2013; 2014) explored within sociological and geographic literature, which, again, furthers narratives around heteronormativity and how these filter into the everyday life of individuals. This will be built on in the following section, which centres specifically on relationships, but here it is worth stating that couple-centric society has a temporal element that leaves people feeling as though they are running out of time. Halberstram (2005) argues that there is a "temporal logic to heteronormativity" with cohabitation, marriage, and reproduction expected to follow a specific order and at certain, socially acceptable, ages across the lifecourse. This again connects to Lahad's work, where she notes that childbearing at a young age is socially unacceptable, as is having children outside of marriage. There is thus an expectation that these so-called adulthood milestones are not only heteronormative, but that they occur within a predefined and socially 'acceptable' temporal framework.

When thinking about the idea of being stuck, paused, in a state of waiting, there is the suggestion that there is a sense of being in-between. Anderson (2004) helps to conceptualise this state of *inbetweenness* through his work on boredom. For Anderson, to be bored is to be in a sense suspended. His work draws on Bloch's (1986) concept of "not yet" materialism: that boredom occupies a space between states. This space in-between that boredom opens up is neither something nor nothing. Indeed, to be bored is to find oneself in the "grey area" – suspended between states of being 'un-bored'. Anderson conceptualises that being bored, being suspended, has the potential to slow and still time-space. Rather than accepting that time and space are linear and empty, Anderson is drawing on how the affective state of boredom can have a profound influence on spatial and temporal dynamics of everyday life. This is built upon in this research by considering not only this idea of inbetweenness, but also the ways in which time-spaces are affectively altered. Feeling on pause or out-of-sync with the temporal expectations of adulthood makes anticipating the future feel intangible (Horton, 2016). There is a privilege to knowing *what comes next*, and the manipulation of

personal time-spaces can see relationships, everyday life and emotion altered in ways that loneliness can erupt.

2.2.4. Conclusion

This section has addressed the *who* of this thesis. It has drawn on the fluidity of understandings around youth and adulthood, noting that these terms are complex, and that taking a relational approach to generations can help disrupt the rigid understanding and categories of youth and adulthood. Millennials are young adults and are often subjected to infantilising narratives, while, at the same time, expected to demonstrate responsibility and independence. This generation can be the subject of much criticism, as highlighted in Chapter 1, and this section has used academic literature on youth transitions and adulthood temporalities to address this. There has been tension between the concepts of structure and agency that has heavily influenced academic work on youth transitions, and here I find the concepts of disrupted biographies and the idea of crunch points useful in understanding how subjectivities and life circumstances can influence how the same life events are approached, and recovered from, by individuals along the axes of diverse societal differentiation. This is an important element of this thesis, as I take seriously the contextual circumstances of individuals in their experience of everyday life and loneliness. Finally, this section has explored ideas around the right kind of adult, who is not only independent from the state in terms of financial and economic security, but also engaged in heteronormative and temporally 'correct' milestones and markers of a specific idea of adulthood. There is an emotional element to this, with the weight of deviating from these expectations leaving young adults as if they are left behind or lacking (Jeffrey, 2008). This is therefore a key focus in my approach to understanding the incidence of loneliness in millennials.

The following section focuses on relationships. This addresses that *what* of this research, as I home in on relationships – or the absence of them – as one of the core themes of this thesis.

2.3. Relationships

In what follows, I engage with another one of the core themes of this thesis: relationships. Given that loneliness refers to the feeling that there is a mismatch between the relationships one has, and the relationships one desires (Perlman and Peplau, 1981), relationships therefore relate to the *what* of this thesis. I begin by drawing on the perception that there has been radical change to the way relationships are perceived, navigated and experienced,

and how this is linked to the incidence of loneliness. I then challenge this, arguing that this is too simplistic, and fails to acknowledge how structural constraints and positionality may mean an individual's approach to relationships have not necessarily undergone radical change. I also draw on the enduring nature of relationships, and consider how intimacies, friendships, and familial ties prevail. I then explore what types of relationships are considered normative, valuable and, as explored above, linked to socially acceptable visualisations of adulthood. The time-spaces of relationships are also explored, drawing on how being unable to access, or being out-of-sync with, the spaces and times that enable relationships to be built and maintained, can also speak to the geographies of loneliness. This section is conceptually framed by Ahmed's (2006) work on (dis)orientation and Berlant's theories of heteronormativity and intimacies.

2.3.1. A changing landscape of relationships?

I first want to highlight Ahmed's (2004) understanding of social norms and emotions and apply this more broadly to my interpretation of social norms and relationships. I do this to contextualise a so-called changing landscape of relationships. Ahmed draws on Butler's (1993) argument that social norms are effects of repetition, with norms (re)produced socially and spatially, as behaviours, actions and attitudes are performed repeatedly. Returning to Ahmed's (2004) concept of emotional scripts, which are socially and spatially situated, I am interested in how a deviation from an emotional script can lead to feelings of exclusion. As Ahmed argues, by aligning oneself with an emotional script, it is reinforced and reproduced, thus creating this affective social norm. To ignore this script is a deviation that will be met with suspicion and marginalization. I later connect this to experiences of loneliness. Firstly, however, I engage with literature on relationships, and how the influence of poststructuralist thought has led to the argument that relationship norms and expectations have undergone dramatic upheaval in modern society.

As has been explored in the youth transitions literature, the influence of poststructuralist thought has suggested that neoliberal values have affected how everyday life is navigated. This literature argues for a wholesale shift from standardised, linear pathways through the lifecourse, towards opportunities for fluidity, choice and agency. This, too, extends to how relationships are theorised and understood, particularly in poststructuralist thought. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that relationships are no longer associated with the convenience of geography or the obligation of kin and are instead representative of personal

choice and satisfaction. Giddens (1992) theorises this as a “pure relationship”. Pure relationships are pursued for the purpose of happiness and pleasure and are only maintained for as long as they are enjoyed by both parties. These relationships can either be platonic, romantic or between kin, but friendship is heralded as the ultimate symbol of a pure relationship, as it is not bound by ties of a financial or legal nature, such as in marriage or a joint mortgage. Further, Giddens (1992), too, draws on the concept of “plastic sexuality”. Plastic sexuality is understood as the ability to express sexuality and pursue sexual relationships outside of traditional gendered and societal norms, as well as divorcing the connection between sex and reproduction. It is therefore the perception that relationship norms have changed in such a way that there is not only greater personal freedom, but also greater equality between individuals.

The extent to which these changes are interpreted in a positive or detrimental light has been the topic of debate. While Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim largely view individualisation as liberating, there are also those such as Putnam who view these trends of enhanced consumer choice as eroding social ties and civic engagement. Putnam’s (2000) influential work *‘Bowling Alone’* argues that in the move away from kinship ties and community obligations, there is an increase in narcissism, producing a society that lacks the values of reciprocity and conviviality. This pessimistic view is not new. It is reminiscent of Tönnies’ (1953 [1887]) influential work on *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft*, or community, is marked by personal ties, moral and social obligations and shared values. *Gesellschaft*, alternatively, is seen to be formed by impersonal, formal relations.

Polarising ‘contrast’ theories tend to explain feelings of loneliness as the loss of (and yearning for) an imagined sense of community. I do not share this view here. A more nuanced understanding of shifting norms and relationships recognises that tight-knit communities can be exclusionary and unwelcoming, particularly for those whose bodies do not fit (Ahmed, 2004). Further, this imagined sense of community can be aspirational for some, as some seek to (re)create spaces where this togetherness can be (re)created (Barcus and Shugatai, 2021). A relationship to community, and what it means, is thus complex.

As Duncan and Smith (2006) argue, such theories of personal agency in relationship negotiation assume that individuals are afforded a great deal of agency and are operating in a society free of structural constraints. Further, I embrace Jamieson’s (1998) view that while

individuals may feel as though there is an equality in how relationships are navigated, this may not always be the case. Using the concept of “public story”, Jamieson draws on how heterosexual couples, specifically, may invest in the overarching suggestion that their relationship is equal, when, instead, gendered norms lead to women still being burdened with most domestic and household chores. I thread this idea of public stories into my conceptual understanding in this thesis. I consider the ways in which the public story of equality, choice and flexibility to relationships is both invested in and internalised by the participants. I also build on this concept by querying how certain relationships are valued, interrogating the ways in which the public story of relationships can feed into negative feelings towards the self, perhaps allowing feelings of loneliness to endure. I explore this idea further in section 3.2 of this chapter.

I also want to consider how relationships are enduring, complex, interdependent, and that they often transcend primary need for personal gain and satisfaction. To do this I draw on the concept of “linked lives”. Linked lives (Elder, 1994) refers to the ways in which lives are interdependent, and are embedded in a complex network of social relations. Further, this concept relates to the ways that individual lives are shaped by the complex interplay between personal preference, and the role of socioeconomic and political structures on the macrolevel. Jarvis (1999) also draws on the “tangled webs” that bring the social and kinship relations of households into conversation with economic opportunities and constraints; playing a role in the negotiation between mobility and economic success, and attachments to people and place. I therefore expand on these ideas here. Bringing together the norms and expectations of neoliberal adulthood that were explored in section 2.2, and the suggestion that relationships are now fluid and no longer constrained by geographical and kinship commitments, I explore the ways in which relationships endure. I also look towards relationships as revealing the wider socio-spatial circumstances that they are situated within. As Tarrant and Hall (2020: 614) argue “within socio-political change and turbulence, on multiple scales, everyday family geographies remerge, their taken-for-granted significance imbued by real-life, real-time conversations, tensions, separations and mournings”. While they are referring specifically to family geographies here, I suggest that this also relates more broadly to a whole spectrum of personal relationships. I engage with the idea that crisis and change impact on everyday life to play out in the minutia of conversations and individual interactions. This therefore speaks to my focus on the spatial-temporal positioning of

millennials in County Durham, as I question the ways the overarching structures, influences and changes, have on their everyday lives, emotions, relationships, and geographies of loneliness.

2.3.2. The 'right' type of relationships?

As set out in section 2.2, visualisations, norms, and expectations of adulthood can also connect to the types of relationships individuals have. Here I draw inspiration from Berlant's (1998) concept of minor intimacies, as well as Berlant and Warner's (1998) theorisation of heteronormativity to conceptually frame the ways in which some relationships are valued in society more highly than others. Further, I draw on how this has the effect of (dis)orientation (Ahmed, 2006), which can lead to a sense of being othered or out-of-sync with one's socio-spatial surroundings. This, I argue, has the effect of encouraging loneliness, as individuals internalise a sense of otherness or that they are lacking if they do not engage in the types of relationships that are deemed important in society.

To begin, I consider Berlant's (1998: 286) theory of minor intimacies, which explores the relationships that exist beyond coupledness and reproduction: "...those who don't or can't find their own way...the queers, the single, the something else – can become so unimaginable, even often to themselves". With heteronormative society privileging the heterosexual couple and nuclear family (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Ramdas, 2012; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Wilkinson, 2013; 2014), there is sense that these minor intimacies exist within the cracks of society's social fabric, lacking legitimacy and value. Wilkinson (2020: 672) develops this by calling for geographers to move beyond familial and towards intimate geographies. This means not only turning attention to those whose relationships fall outside the heteronormative, but also to "uncover the potentially queer moments in seemingly 'normal lives'". By looking beyond the rigid categories of relationships, there is potential to understand the intricacies and complexities of human relationships, while also gaining an understanding of how loneliness emerges within this backdrop of public stories around relationships. I thus take this forward in my thesis, inviting participants to discuss their personal communities (Pahl and Spencer, 2003). This challenges assumptions that distinguish familial from non-familial ties, allowing for a more nuanced mapping of their relationships and geographies of loneliness. Rather than specifically 'naming' relationships and engaging with the geographies of friendship (Bunnell et al., 2011), family (Harker and Martin, 2012; Valentine, 2008), and intimacies (Morrison et al., 2012; Wilkinson, 2020), I give

space to participants to define relationships in their own terms. This also helps gain a sense of how these normative representations of relationships and family life can (dis)orientate them, and (re)produce feelings of loneliness.

2.3.3. Time-spaces of relationships

The spatial and temporal situatedness of an individual can have an influence on the ability to build, maintain, and navigate relationships. To begin, I want to consider the spaces that can facilitate relationships to be formed, looking particularly at social infrastructures within the community that provides the opportunity to meet, talk, and build bonds with others. Hall and Bates (2019) argue that repeated encounters in everyday spaces can contribute to a sense of belonging, providing a space in which to build a network of acquaintances and friendships. For Botterill (2018), successful community building can be done by encouraging people into a space and uniting them through a shared interest or hobby. Each of these points suggest that for personal connections to develop, there needs to be spaces that can facilitate these meetings, which are also regular, reliable, and perhaps have something – such as an activity – that invites individuals into a space. This not only has the potential to provide opportunities to form social bonds, and ease feelings of loneliness, but also has the capacity to bring people together who may have never found themselves in the same room as each other before. For Askins (2015), this can lead to a transformative politics of encounter, changing how people and see about others, thus giving potential for not only enhancing personal wellbeing, but community wellbeing too.

However, such spaces require financial support, and austerity measures have meant that social infrastructure and the types of spaces that support personal and community bonds have closed or reduced their hours of opening. Libraries (Hitchen, 2021), Sure Start centres (Jupp, 2013; 2019), community centres (Hall, 2019; Jupp, 2013), craft clubs (Hall and Jayne, 2016) and youth services (Horton, 2016), are just some of the spaces that geographers have turned attention towards in understanding the impact of austerity on everyday life. While these spaces are a mix of being run by the local council, community or volunteers, they each provide opportunities for local communities to avoid social isolation. Paradoxically, funding cuts to social infrastructure appear to thwart government initiatives intended to prevent loneliness and isolation through social prescribing. This is where health professionals are encouraged to prescribe individuals access to non-medical facilities in the community (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2016). Stenning and Hall (2018) highlight this in their response

to the government's strategy for tackling loneliness (2018), where they argue that the government's approach to loneliness has been distinctly depoliticised, neglecting the ways that the closure of spaces in the community can allow instances of loneliness to proliferate. I build on this idea here, exploring not only the physical spaces that allow relationships or loneliness to emerge, but also the wider geographical space of County Durham, and how the social infrastructure in this area influences the geographies of loneliness. Further, I query the temporal positioning of millennials, considering their age and position in society, asking how being a young adult in this time, in this place, can speak to opportunities – or the lack of – to build relationships. I also question their temporalities in terms of the everyday material time, thinking about those who work unsociable hours, or are unemployed when those around them work, and how this can lead to feelings of isolation. I therefore seek to explore how the multi-scalar times and spaces are woven into the narratives of loneliness by the millennials I speak to in this research.

2.3.4. Conclusion

This section has addressed the what of the research, taking a multi-scalar approach to how relationships are understood, discussed, and internalised, from a societal level down to an individual degree. I have drawn on narratives that suggest there has been a societal shift in how relationships are navigated and encountered, and that the pursuit of pure relationships has led to an atomisation of individuals, no longer tied by kin or geographical proximity. I have argued that relationships are, instead, complex, enduring and interdependent, if not still influenced by structural constraints. I also consider how heteronormativity and the public stories of intimacy, relationships, and family life can have an effect of (dis)orientating those who do not *fit*. I question how this can be internalised and perhaps contribute to feeling othered and lonely. Finally, I have considered the time-spaces of relationships, arguing that the temporal and spatial positioning of millennials in County Durham has the potential to allow loneliness to emerge. I thus take these ideas forward to better understand both the geographies of loneliness, as well as how the subject of loneliness is a spatial and political one.

In the following section, I home in on the where of this research. I take a critical look at the role of place, particularly that of the hometown and community, to gain an understanding of how this feeds into the everyday life, emotions and relationships of millennials in County Durham.

2.4. Place: imagined geographies and a sense of belonging to hometown

This section draws in on how loneliness can emerge in the everyday experience, emotions and relationships that connect to, emerge from, and (re)produce place. I address the *where* of this research, building on the introduction to County Durham in Chapter 1, and look towards the academic arguments that help make sense of the way place influences (dis)connection. I first consider how so-called 'left-behind places,' and the imagined geographies of this, can be internalised and play a role in an individual's self-worth and sense of self. I thus take an emotional geographical approach to the economic geography of County Durham, exploring how emotions attach, and become embedded in, areas that faced economic decline, as well as those who inhabit them. I also explore the role of belonging and comfort in place, looking towards arguments that suggest a connection to place can bring solace and crucial emotional attachment. I, too, explore the idea of tight-knit communities and the role they place in feelings of (dis)connection. I make sense of my own research within these themes by engaging with this conceptual framework, focusing on the relationality of space and the relational geographies of loneliness, as well as how County Durham millennials can become (dis)orientated by the places they encounter and live within.

2.4.1. *Imagined geographies and left-behind places*

Chapter 1 highlighted the economic decline and deindustrialised legacy of County Durham. The area therefore faces high levels of inequality and fewer opportunities than other regions within the United Kingdom. This is not to suggest, however, that there is not a diversity in the lived experience and opportunities for those living in County Durham. Nor do I want to suggest a degree of determinism for those who live there. However, given the region's legacy and socio-economic unevenness, there is an element of the North East of England being coded as inherently working-class (Taylor, 2012). In this section I am not drawing on the economic geography of the research area and, instead, I am looking towards the ways that County Durham is imagined, discursively and affectively (re)produced, exploring what this means for feelings of self-worth, belonging and loneliness.

Taylor (2012) engages with arguments around neoliberal adulthood and success, that I drew on in section 2. Arguing that mobility is a key component of these aspirational narratives of the 'right' kind of adulthood, Taylor explores the ways in which this speaks to how one fits into place. Middle class identities become imbued with tropes of achievement, aspiration, mobility and detachment from people and place, as they flexibly move through space in the

pursuit of success. In contrast, working class identities are cast as stagnant, stuck in place, and left behind, unlike successful individuals who move on, and through, the spaces they inhabit. Not only does this apply to working class people, but also to working class places. Whole geographical areas are seen to absorb these characterisations. People and place are therefore viewed as one, positioning people in and out of place, creating an 'us' and 'them' dynamic. Meaning is thus deterministically infused into place and those who live there.

Crossley (2017: 40) also engages with this idea in his work on the North East of England, arguing that "the 'problems' associated with these places are portrayed as 'problems' of the places and, indeed, of the people that reside there". While the people who live in this region have not determined the macroeconomic policies that have led to areas like County Durham facing socio-economic decline, the media and political discourse cast these people and places as almost existing independently within their own ecosystem, unaffected by wider policy decisions and disinvestment. Crossley argues that this leads to people living in the North East being othered, and that there is spatial symbolism at play where the region's population is uncritically cast as 'backward' and 'stuck in the past'. Here, there is a sense of cultural and social isolation. These people and places are regarded as problematic and at fault for not joining the middle-class characteristics of a broader neoliberal society.

Once again, Ahmed's (2006) concept of (dis)orientation can be usefully applied here. Within a society that values success, aspiration and mobility, areas like County Durham that have faced decline, and the people who are discursively produced as being inherently connected to the 'ills' of the area, could be understood as disorientated. In this thesis I will therefore build on this idea of being culturally isolated (Crossley, 2017), viewing this through the lens of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006). Further, I want to consider how these characterisations of place can be affectively and emotively felt. In McKenzie's (2015: 64) work on a council estate in Nottingham, she argues that "local issues and problems within a poor neighbourhood are felt sharply by those within them, having an impact on what they do, how they think, shaping how they see the world and themselves". I want to take this idea forward here, and consider how spaces are made through perceptions and the relationships to, and with, space and place.

Further, in this thesis I not only want to question how imaginations of place can make people feel, but also question what happens if they do not believe they fit in with the narrative of

the place and the people who live there. I want to consider how invested those in County Durham become with the way their hometowns are discursively represented, and in what sense they internalise this or reject it. I also want to think about what happens when these conceptualisations are internalised, and the participant may feel othered within an area that is already othered. I will therefore use the ideas highlighted in this section to carve out an understanding of the geographies of loneliness, as well as how there is a relational geography of loneliness, attempting to grasp how cultural and social isolation can affect the everyday spaces, and navigation of the hometown for millennials in County Durham.

2.4.2. A sense of belonging

I also want to think about place in terms of a sense of belonging. The idea of belonging feels clearly connected to loneliness, and I thus use this concept to interrogate how belonging – or not belonging – to the material environment in which one lives, can help unpick the geographies of loneliness on the meso scale. Probyn (1996) identifies the affective dimension to belonging, drawing on how *longing* is something that is embodied and emotionally felt, with the longing to feel connected people, place, objects, practices and ideas, a key characteristic of what it is to belong. Probyn's pivotal work on belonging has therefore opened up a body of work in human geography that approaches belonging as a sense of *longing*, which explores the concept by highlighting the ways belonging is sensed and thus affectively encountered when situated in place (Fenster, 2005; Mills, 2006). I carry this concept forward in this research, and explore it further within the framework of a politics of belonging, as well as how belonging can be understood as (dis)comfort in place.

Fenster (2005) argues that a sense of belonging is encountered along the axes of social differentiation and is, in particular, gendered, with power structures influencing who has access to resources, and who is therefore invited to belong. Fenster (2005: 229) uses the concept of "boundaries of belonging" to relate to the sense of belonging felt by women and ethnically marginalised people, arguing that these boundaries are "formed by the hegemon and exclude the 'other': those that are not considered by the hegemon as part of it". Mee and Wright (2009) draw on these ideas and question the politics of belonging. They argue that creating a space of belonging is a political act, in terms of who is welcomed and how space is carved out to be inviting to a diverse range of people. Those spaces that are inviting to only a limited group of people can result in exclusionary and territorial behaviour (Middleton et al., 2005). In effect this perpetuates and reinforces spaces where belonging is

for some and not others. To interrogate this further, I want to consider the concept of comfort as belonging.

Kearns and Parkinson (2001) draw on the significance of the neighbourhood and argue that the concept of comfort is integral to understanding our relationship with this spatial scale. As this scale, which I refer to as the meso scale throughout the thesis, is important to my understanding of the geographies of loneliness, I centralise the idea of comfort in understanding how millennials navigate their lifeworlds. Kearns and Parkinson (2001: 2106) also highlight how feeling comfortable within one's neighbourhood is linked to secure encounters and a degree of predictability, which I argue here are factors that play an important role in one's (dis)connection to place and the manifestation of loneliness. Yarker (2019) expands on this concept of comfort as a sense of belonging by weaving in the notion of confidence, arguing that to be confident in one's surroundings can inform an important part of feeling a sense of belonging. Yarker (2019: 540) exemplifies this in her work on local belonging in the Byker Wall housing estate in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, arguing that "a sense of belonging came in the form of more mundane experiences of place – simple behaviours like saying hello to neighbours...such acts were grounded in the confidence to participate in everyday life". This connects with Burrell's (2016) argument that small, neighbourly acts reveal the importance of everyday encounters, and that nearness and proximity are valuable to a sense of belonging. I carry these ideas forward in my own research, with the view to understand how everyday encounters and confidence to engage in neighbourhood life can influence feelings of connection.

Yarker (2019) also noted that there were instances where there was a lack of confidence to engage with others. This was a result of residents not feeling the same as those in their neighbouring proximity, through either being new to the area, feeling different to most of their neighbours, or perhaps having lived there so long that they have watched the place and inhabitants change beyond recognition. This led to a lack of confidence to engage with those around them, not just affecting their sense of (not) belonging, but also increasing feelings of isolation. This connects in some way to Walkerdine's (2010) research on feelings of security and uncertainty in a North Wales town that saw the closure of steelworks, which was the main source of employment in the area. Taking a psychoanalytical approach, Walkerdine argues that the community relations that surrounded the local steelwork industry formed a "skin" that "held" the members of the community together. When the steelworks closed, this

skin ruptured, and the community found it hard to move forward and accept newcomers into the area. There was a sense that a certainty of community was being mourned, but this community was exclusive and based on a specific relationship to an industry, which had a temporality to it. I therefore want to pull together these ideas of lacking confidence, as well as uncertainty, when interrogating the geographies of loneliness on the scale of the hometown and local community. While the participants in this research may not necessarily feel exclusion based on social differentiation (Sibley, 1995), I want to query the feeling that there is a lack of sameness or, as Wilkinson (2020) puts it, the queer moments in seemingly 'normal lives' which can result in bodies feeling (dis)orientated and lonely. By engaging with the complexity of relationship to place, and a sense of belonging, I seek to build an understanding of the relational geographies of loneliness, and how loneliness affects, makes, breaks, builds, slows, stills place and space.

The next section continues the where of this research by homing in on the domestic sphere as a site that geographies of loneliness can be encountered and navigated.

2.5. Place: everyday life, emotion and relationships in the domestic sphere

This section continues the theme of *where* this research is focused but now closing in on the more intimate scale of the home. Home has multiple meanings, and can be taken to mean a country, city, street, physical building, a person, or a feeling. This subjectivity of what home is also brings with it a range of complex, overlapping emotions: happiness, comfort, fear, safety, belonging, loneliness. Home can also be a container for various and complex relationships: to the self, family, romantic partners, friends, roommates, or strangers (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Jupp et al., 2019; Nowicki, 2014). Given the multiplicity of the term home, I want to clarify that in this research I am referring to the material site of where the participants live, and the relationships and emotions that exist within it. I will refer to this as the domestic sphere in Chapter 6 when I closely engage with loneliness on the intimate scale. In this section I draw on the ways that human geography has conceptualised home, looking towards the politics of home to highlight how inequalities and subjectivities affect how the domestic sphere is encountered, and how this speaks to wider structural processes and constraints. I also look towards work on the multigenerational home, addressing tropes surrounding the millennial generation and 'boomeranging' home. In pulling these strands together, I aim to flesh out a picture of millennials in County Durham having to navigate and experience loneliness on the intimate scale of the domestic sphere.

2.5.1. Politics and geographies of the home

Blunt and Dowling (2006: 220) have been influential to the subject of geographies of the home. They argue that home is “simultaneously material and imaginative; the nexus between home, power and identity”. They argue that to be truly critical, one must look beyond the binary of the home being either a place of refuge or fear, to embrace the complexities and contradictions that are contained within the home. Brickell (2012) argues that the home can serve as a vital site in which to research and gather an understanding of the micro-geographies of social and spatial uncertainty. Jupp et al. (2019: 5) build on this and suggest that focusing on the home as a material site reveals “a set of issues at the intersections of subjectivities and lived experiences and of wider regimes of power”. I take these arguments forward to map out how loneliness is experienced on the intimate scale within the domestic sphere, but also how this speaks to broader issues, uncertainties, inequalities, imaginaries of the home, and of domestic life. I do this by unpicking the spatial and temporal context of millennials, asking how their situatedness in County Durham, as young adults, at this moment in social history, can deepen our understanding of the geographies of loneliness.

Here, I also want to consider the ways in which the home is coded and layered with meaning. In particular, I will consider the ways the home and domestic life are feminised, and how the role of gender is heavily woven into understandings of the home. In the recent past, feminist geographers drew particular attention to this when challenging the divide between productive and reproductive labour, arguing that the everyday lives and emotions of women – particularly within the home – received little academic inquiry, with the discipline focusing on labour outside of the home (Rose, 1993). As Bowlby et al. (1982) highlights, the home is a site of reproductive labour, mainly carried out by women, and was traditionally overlooked when considering the success and support of the political economy. This laid important groundwork in human geography and has helped reveal how the domestic sphere is coded as female. Bowlby (2019) argues that, because the domestic sphere was cast as feminine in normative popular representations, the care practices and cleanliness of the home continue to be considered the responsibility of women in the household, even when all members of the household also work outside of the home. The experience of time within the household is therefore also gendered, and Holdsworth (2021) highlights how the home can be charged

with feelings of busyness and exhaustion, drawing attention to the critical temporalities that are also contained within the home.

Price (2002) also argues that ideological representations of the home as feminine, intimate, and safe, can mean that domestic violence is more easily hidden, so as not to disrupt the public story of the home as one which is safe and comfortable. This exemplifies the ways in which imaginaries of the home are so heavily invested in. Further, Varley and Blasco (2000) found that participants in their research on retired men expressed unhappiness and discomfort with the lack of privacy and autonomy that they previously enjoyed in the workplace, because the home was perceived as a feminine space. This helps exemplify not only how the home can become charged with emotion and gendered expectations, but also how fluid the domestic sphere is in relation to life circumstances. As the men in Varley and Blasco's research saw their temporal experience of the home shift, so did their emotions and navigation of this space. This is a point of interest that can be carried forward in my research, as I question how lived experiences, subjectivities, transitional moments and crunch points can affect one's association and sense of being in and at home.

I, too, want to consider the care practices that take place within the home, within the context of the austerity landscape. This helps give some indication of how wider socioeconomic circumstances can affect the everyday life, emotions and relationships within the home. Hall (2019) explores how austerity cuts have put a squeeze on the capacity of the state to care, which then transfers to informal care practices, which are often carried out by women, and in the home. Jupp (2019) also explores this idea of care being stretched, but instead focuses on the closure of Sure Start centres. Sure Start centres provide support and advice for families, with Jupp finding that their presence in the community meant that families felt more supported and had a greater capacity to care and ensure parental wellbeing, when they had access to these centres. In the absence of Sure Start, families, particularly mothers, felt greater levels of weariness and exhaustion within the home. This effect of austerity on care practices being spread more thinly and the emotional geographies of this, speaks to the ways in which home can represent an insight into the spatialities and temporalities that the domestic sphere sits within. I engage with these ideas in this thesis to reveal how the geographies of loneliness can be uncovered in understanding the everyday life, emotions and relationships that are situated in the home.

2.5.2. *Multigenerational homes*

This section addresses the subject of multigenerational homes, engaging with tropes around a lack of financial stability for millennials such as when they are said to ‘boomerang’ back to the parental home. This is understood to be particularly pertinent in difficult economic times (Horschelmann, 2011; Schwiter, 2013). As Chapter 1 outlines, these *difficult times* can be associated with the temporal context of being a millennial. Entering the labour market during, or post, the 2008 financial crisis, over a decade of austerity, and living within a region that has a legacy of deindustrialisation and disinvestment, positions this generational group in County Durham as a population that has faced hard economic times. As a result, Tomaszczyk and Worth (2020) argue that precarity has become a millennial norm, affecting the ability to imagine one’s future, and limiting a sense of linearity to the lifecourse. Tomaszczyk and Worth (2020) suggest that a way to overcome these negative feelings associated with a paused lifecourse, was to live in the parental home and use this time to accumulate personal wealth. This describes a move to *get back on track* regarding their future. They did find, however, that this was only one of many reasons that led millennials to live within a multigenerational home. They noted that culture, ethnicity and gender shaped decisions on whether to live within the parental home, not just financial insecurity. Such ‘boomeranging’ narratives also infantilise millennials, positioning them as dependent children returning to the care, guidance and support of the parental safety net. It was instead the case that in many instances, millennials and their families had interdependent relationships, sharing the financial burden within the home and emotionally supporting one another.

However, these arguments do not account for scenarios in which millennials do not have a place to ‘boomerang’ back to. Nor do they acknowledge the complex and sometimes difficult relationships that families have across generations. Horschelmann (2011) highlights how power relations dictate the dynamics of home life and can, as a result, structure the decision to reside with family. Wilkinson (2014) also explores this element of power relations in familial relationships, in the context of single, queer adults returning to the family home. Finding that the family home was coded as heteronormative, and thus there was a sense of unease for the participants in returning there as both queer and single, highlights how multigenerational living is not always an option for adults. There is also the argument that some millennials do not have family homes to return to, either in that they have limited

family, or there is no space for them in the parental or familial home. In this thesis I address these ideas, and explore the relationships, emotions and everyday life that are placed within the domestic sphere.

2.5.3. Conclusion

Sections 4 and 5 have addressed the *where* of this thesis, taking a multi-scalar approach to the subject of place. Section 4 assesses the sense of place and imagined geographies of place on the neighbourhood, meso scale. Section 5 draws in closer, exploring the politics of home and multigenerational homes that contribute to an understanding of the geographies of loneliness on the intimate scale. Together, these sections have continued to explore the ways in which subjectivities, lived experience and inequalities can alter an individual's affective and everyday experience of place. I build on these bodies of work throughout Chapters 5 and 6 to consider the ways a (dis)orientation within place can form part of an individual's experience and navigation of (dis)connection and loneliness.

The section that follows draws on the discreet and emerging literature on the geographies of loneliness. Here I highlight the arguments and concepts within this sub-discipline and highlight the gap which this thesis offers contribution to.

2.6. Geographies of loneliness

While geography has engaged with the topic of loneliness, this has been limited, and has instead hinted at themes which engage with the socio-spatial experience of loneliness. Topics such as bereavement (Conradson, 2012; Evans, 2014; Maddrell, 2016 ; McNiven, 2016), physical and rural isolation (Leyshon, 2008; Parr and Philo, 2003), alienation (Binnie et al., 2007) and exclusion (Sibley, 1995) all have elements that help contextualise what geography can offer to the subject of loneliness. To begin, I therefore want to consider how the subject of loneliness has been defined and emerged in social sciences more broadly.

Weiss's (1973) work has been influential in this regard. Loneliness is widely understood as being comprised of "emotional isolation" and "social isolation". Emotional isolation relates to an absence of close emotional ties and attachments, while social isolation conveys an absence of socially integrative attachments. This has been a useful distinction and is often quoted in policy documents and reports (UK Government, 2018) that contextualise what loneliness is. There has also been a wealth of research conducted into loneliness in the social sciences (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008; Hawkey

and Cacioppo, 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Perlman and Peplau, 1981), yet this work mainly uses quantitative methods and focuses on the biological health and physical experience of loneliness, as opposed to the socio-spatial approach I am taking in this work. Morrison and Smith (2018) engage with Weiss' (1973) work from a geographical perspective in their New Zealand based work. They spatialise Weiss' approach by arguing that emotional isolation can be reduced by physical proximity to a partner, and social isolation can be dependent on the geography of a place, and whether an individual has access to the wider community, friends and colleagues. While this work has helped spatialise the language of Weiss' work, and the topic of loneliness, it does not critically engage with the socio-economic conditions and politics of loneliness.

Franklin (2009) has helped broaden the understanding of loneliness by taking a critical look at loneliness in the context of societal change. Drawing on Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity, which relates to neoliberal society and the ways choice, aspiration and flexibility has filtered into personal life, Franklin argues that loneliness is the result of loosening attachments and ties:

"loneliness is the price we pay for our freedom and choice since, given that it is extended to everyone, there is nothing at all to stop those who love you now, who support you now, who employ you now, from dumping you the minute they become bored of you or find a better alternative (Franklin, 2009: 352)

While I have drawn on the ways in which neoliberal society and values speak to the geographies of loneliness in this chapter, I have gone further to argue that they can be internalised to render people *less than* by feeling that they have not 'lived up to' such values and expectations. Franklin's suggestion that such societal change has drastically altered the landscape of relationships is a radical one. In arguing that the social, emotional and spatial content of loneliness is specific to liquid modernity, Franklin suggests that there is no agency to how individuals navigate their relationships. Yet, as I drew on in Section 2.3.1, this argument fails to consider the complexities, interdependencies and enduring nature of relationships. Here, I embrace the idea that lives are linked (Elder, 1994; 2000) and are a "tangled web" (Jarvis, 1999) of relations.

Holton et al. (2022) have made a significant contribution to the ways that loneliness can be subjective and spatialised. Drawing on their work on loneliness with young farmers, Holton

et al. (2022: 16) explore the idea of “spatial anxieties” that speak to stigma surrounding loneliness: “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”. This idea of loneliness infiltrating relationships is something I build on here. As highlighted in Section 2.1.3 of my conceptual framework, I formulate a relational geographies of loneliness approach that engages with the idea that loneliness affects, (re)produces, shrinks, expands, and manipulates space and social relations. Further, Holton et al.’s understanding of stigma spatialising loneliness is an intriguing one, and I weave this into my approach to loneliness. Their work also explores the ways in which loneliness becomes embedded into discourses of cultural identities which, in their research, is one of the “tough farmer”. Again, this is something I embrace in this research. I consider how representations of relationships, adulthood, emotions, and everyday life are internalised, adding to the spatialities and geographies of loneliness.

While Holton et al. (2022) hints at the politicisation of loneliness in their conclusion, this does not feature prominently in their work. Hertz’s (2020) argument that loneliness is as much about a subjective and social sense of disconnection, as well as a sense of abandonment from the state, is one which I adopt. The idea that being disconnected from the state feeds into a sense of loneliness highlights the political character of loneliness. This point of view has also been highlighted in geographical work on loneliness. Stenning and Hall (2018) outline how the UK government’s 2018 plan to tackle loneliness was distinctly apolitical, failing to recognise how a decade of austerity had removed opportunities and spaces to connect, engage with the wider community, and ensure a sense of wellbeing. Wilkinson (2022: 32) has also critiqued the neoliberal positioning of loneliness as a personal problem: “the language of loneliness also flattens, precluding any discussion of structural inequalities: loneliness becomes seen as an individual disorder to which anyone might succumb”. Further, Batsleer and Duggan (2020), explore the social conditions of loneliness, drawing on the ways in which economic precarity, poverty and inequality can influence feelings of loneliness. While not geographers, they are prominent voices in youth loneliness studies, and there is a spatial element to be considered here too. Instances of inequality and poverty are tightly bound to place and an unevenness in the socio-economic landscape. I thus pull together these ideas of politicising loneliness, along with Holton et al.’s (2022)

understanding of loneliness as a spatial anxiety that speaks to cultural identities, to build on in this thesis.

The work in this section has been crucial in developing my understanding of loneliness, and the sections that have preceded this have informed my approach to loneliness as a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others and the state. There are, however, gaps in the geographies of loneliness literature that this research seeks to fill. Firstly, my approach is multi-scalar: I locate loneliness on the societal, macro scale; the neighbourhood, meso scale; and the domestic space, embodied and intimate scale. On each of these scales I embrace the everyday life, emotions and relationships that I consider to be the core themes of the geographies of loneliness. Further, I build on work that has explored loneliness as a political issue, by engaging with the unique and uneven socio-economic geography of County Durham. Taking a generational approach is also new within this sub-discipline, as I interrogate the spatial-temporal positioning of millennials and how these feed into the experience of loneliness. The conceptual framing and the weaving together of the above bodies of literature is also unique, and in the following section I tie together this section, along with the preceding sections, to highlight how this chapter has situated the research.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature and outlined the conceptual framework that I situate this research within. I have approached the topic of loneliness using three key themes: everyday life, emotion, and relationships. Each of these themes thread through the chapter, helping to contextualise my multi-scalar approach to the topic. I have broadly identified three scales in this chapter and these map on to each of my three empirical chapters. The macro scale is represented in the socio-economic spatial-temporal context of the County Durham millennials, as well as the overarching neoliberal norms and expectations that sit in the background of their everyday lives. The meso scale relates to the scale of the neighbourhood, or hometown, of the millennials, asking how the imagined geographies and sense of belonging can speak to loneliness at this scale. The intimate scale, homes in on the expressions of loneliness within the domestic sphere and on the embodied level.

Within and across all three scales, I weave in my feminist, phenomenological and relational conceptual framework. This framework embraces the lived experience, inequalities, subjectivities and situated knowledges of the millennials I speak to. Within this framework, I

take an emotional geographical approach, and I consider how political affects and spatial-temporal affective atmospheres can reveal the personal lifeworlds and experiences of loneliness. I take particular inspiration from Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenological approach, to ask how the spatialities and temporalities of being a millennial in County Durham can provoke a sense of (dis)orientation and loneliness. Inspired by Hall's (2019) work on the relational geographies of austerity, I consider my own relational geography of loneliness, asking how loneliness (re)produces spaces, and how spaces (re)produce loneliness.

Taking a relational approach also aids my phenomenological adoption of personal lifeworlds, as it reduces the tension between structure and agency, aiding my consideration of lived experience as existing in relation to social structures and human agency. Finally, each of the preceding sections has helped to frame my own contribution to the geographies of loneliness. Here, I understand loneliness as a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state. This definition helps account for the multi-scalar approach I have taken. My work thus fills a gap in the literature by using this innovative conceptual framework and intersecting literatures, while also engaging with multiple scales and sites. Taking a generational approach also helps to politicise the subject of loneliness, positioning County Durham Millennials in ways that provide fertile ground for loneliness to persist.

Chapter 3. Researching Emotion, Everyday Life and Relationships: Reflections on a Feminist, Phenomenological and Relational Methodology

Data collection for this research began in October 2018 and ended in late September 2019. It is difficult, however, to capture the start and end points of data collection as I never, and still have not, left the 'field'. As a millennial living in County Durham, the (auto)ethnographic element of data collection began as soon as I began writing my research proposal in 2016. It has also never really stopped, as I continue to observe how loneliness speaks to the spatialities and temporalities of County Durham millennials. However, for the year between 2018-2019, I dedicated my PhD work to the collection of data: conducting interviews, volunteering, meeting with stakeholders, and mapping out the care, support and community available in the county. I reflect on all of these activities in this chapter. As has been outlined in the preceding chapters, I set out in my research to understand the subjective, intimate and lived experiences of loneliness for County Durham millennials. This chapter therefore draws on the *doing* of this research, as I reflect on design rationale, motivations, frustrations, pauses, and lightbulb moments of conducting this qualitative study.

This chapter is split into four parts. The first outlines the methodology and research design. This sets out the feminist, phenomenological and relational epistemology that informs the project. I outline my choice of methods, the early stages of planning, and the difficult, arduous process of recruitment. After this, I discuss the methods in practice. Here, I take each of my methods and reflect on the value and the challenges they revealed. Third, I draw on my reflections from, and beyond, the field. This section reflects on my positionality, being an insider/outsider in the field, and the ethical considerations that have continued to challenge me in writing up this research. Finally, I outline how the data has been analysed. This section also acknowledges the disconnect between data collection and data analysis, as I returned from a year's maternity leave and into a global pandemic in October 2020. I reflect on how this has shaped the project, even after the data had already been collected, and has influenced the ways this research has been understood, written about, and reflected on.

3.1. Methodology and research design

For an explorative study that seeks to explore the personal, diverse and intimate experiences of loneliness, this research demanded a qualitative methodology. This enabled me to collect

rich, insightful data (Denscombe, 1998), explore the human experience (Hakim, 2000; Winchester and Rofe, 2010) and understand the participants as emotional actors (Given, 2008). Applying a feminist, phenomenological and relational methodology has also meant that I have taken seriously situated knowledges (England, 2006; Harraway, 1988), self-reflexivity, my own positionality, human interdependence, lived experiences, and considered not only which methods have been used, but also how they have been put into practice (Harding, 1987). This assertion has inspired me in terms of my approach to collecting data. Here, I have utilized a personal and collaborative approach to engaging with participants about sensitive topics. I will expand on how I applied this to specific scenarios later in the chapter, but here I wanted to highlight that participant wellbeing was at the centre of my concerns. While not a professional, I researched and produced a list of organisations, charities, and lines of support that I could signpost the participant to in cases where I felt there was a duty of care. Again, this was often challenging and complex, and I will reflect more on it in section 3.2, but here I wanted to state that this was a key part of my methodological design.

Further, I felt it was important to share my own position and experiences with the participants. While this was not always appropriate, I was guided by the relational space of the interview, and often made personal reflections to help make the participants feel more comfortable. While this could be criticised for being too subjective (Ritchie et al., 2013) and not robust enough for academic inquiry, I was inspired and guided by autoethnographic philosophy, which embraces the collaboration, meaning-making and honesty of a researcher that uses their own positionality in a research study (Butz and Besio, 2009; Chang, 2008; Shaw, 2013). As a result, I believe that I have gathered rich, powerful, and moving participant testimonies, which would not have been possible if it were not for my openness and self-reflection during the interview process.

With these values in my mind, I selected qualitative methods that would enable me to explore my research topic within my conceptual framework. Table 1 shows the methods used, how the data was recorded, and a brief rationale for the application.

Data Collected	Recording Method	Reasoning
Life story interviews	21 out of 22 interviews were recorded via a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. Reflections and notes were also made following each interview in a research diary. For the participant who did not wish to be recorded, I made notes during and after the interview.	This was my primary method and produced the bulk of my data. This method was selected to hear the personal and lived experiences of County Durham millennials, and how loneliness was encountered in their personal histories, presents, and everyday lives.
Personal community maps	All participants completed a personal community map either prior to our interview, or during. This involved the participants plotting out the people in their lives that they considered as part of their personal community. Inspired by Spencer and Pahl's (2006) work, participants recorded who they felt the closest to in the centre, working their way out in concentric circles (see figure 2)	This method was chosen to gain an understanding of the everyday relationships, which were both meaningful and fleeting, in the lives of the participants.
Relationship diaries	Prior to each interview I asked the participants to complete a relationship diary that outlined the level of contact they had on an 'average week'. It was a simple table including the 7 days of the week and morning, afternoon, and evening.	I designed this method to help support the life story interviews and personal community maps. The aim was to gain an understanding of how (dis)connected the participant was on an average week. I also asked for this to be completed prior to meeting, to give me some context to the participant's everyday life, and help me tailor my questions to each participant.
(Auto)ethnography of County Durham	I conducted participant observation, attended community groups, volunteered, and 'mapped out' the County's social infrastructure, community spaces, support groups, and access to services. I explored how this had changed over time, particularly following austerity measures. I used policy documents, local news articles, and governmental reports and making extensive field notes. The autoethnographic element emerged from my own position as a millennial living in County Durham, with my reflections recorded in a research diary.	I felt this was an important method to include to not only utilise my own positionality, but to also conduct an ethnography of how spaces are navigated in County Durham. It also helped contextualise the changing and uneven landscape of County Durham.
Field notes and reflections	These were recorded in my research diary from October 2018 to September 2019. They included my emotions, reflections, initial analysis of data, anticipations, and thoughts.	This was an important aspect of data collection as it has enabled me to see the process of data collection, argument formation, and key reflections that have helped in the analysis and write up of this thesis.

Table 1. Methods of data collection and rationale

I will expand on the choice of these methods, and my reflections on using them in practice in section 3.2. Next, I turn to seeking ethical approval and gaining informed consent.

3.1.1. Ethical approval

I sought ethical approval early within my PhD research and was granted 'high risk' ethical approval in August 2018 from Newcastle University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). The reasoning for this was because I always intended to volunteer alongside my PhD, and I hoped that I could blend my voluntary experience with my PhD research. I therefore sought to become involved with an organisation that was, in a general sense, connected to the issue of loneliness. While ethical approval was not necessarily needed as my volunteering was technically separate to my research, I wanted to ensure that any (auto)ethnographic findings and reflections could be ethically folded into my thesis. I draw on my volunteering, how it connected to my research, and what I learnt from these experiences in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

Consent forms, information sheets, and a debrief sheet were all produced and can be found in the Appendix. Informed consent was gained by all the participants, as I took care to explain the research, how the data would be used, and that their information would be anonymised. I did this prior to meeting, before I started recording the interview, and while debriefing. I also ensured that participants had my contact details in case they had any further questions, wished to clarify anything, or wanted to withdraw consent. In some instances, I double-checked information with participants prior to its inclusion within the thesis. There was also one incident, which I reflect on in section 3.1.4, where the individual signed a consent form, but I did not feel comfortable including their information or testimony. Like Lipson (1994), I thus considered informed consent to be an ongoing process which continued beyond the signing of the consent form, and beyond the initial collection of data.

3.1.2. Recruitment

Recruitment was one of the more challenging aspects of this research. The topic and experience of loneliness is relatively hidden in the social sciences, which is what led me to the subject area. While this was a motivation to conduct this research, in my pursuit to understand something that is so often stigmatised and coded with shame, it also meant that finding people who would willingly talk to me was difficult. As I discuss in section 3.2.5, part

of my research design was to conduct (auto)ethnographic research into County Durham. This involved attending relevant groups, meetings and events that I thought would closely align with my research interests. I also volunteered with some local groups whose focus was on loneliness. As well as wanting to gain a deeper understanding of the issues associated with loneliness, I wanted to dedicate my time to something I was personally passionate about, not just academically. I did this from October 2017 up until I went on Maternity leave in September 2019. My hope was that through this voluntary work and networking, I would broaden my opportunities to recruit. Unfortunately, this was not the case. I found that groups in County Durham that specifically targeted loneliness - that would, I hoped, have a pool of participants happy to discuss the topic with me – were not in the right age range for my research. I worked with Youth Focus North East in Gateshead, who had contacts across County Durham, but their service users were mostly under the age of 18. I also worked with a group in Seaham, The Clarke Lister Feel Good Centre, who did not have any specific age requirements, but were mostly older, retired people who went along.

While I constantly had the issue in the back of my mind from when I began my PhD in 2017, I did not start the recruitment process in earnest until November 2018. It was around this time that I considered changing my target demographic, swaying towards exploring the geographies of loneliness in young(er) adults. This was purely due to the ease in recruitment for this age group, and that I had done voluntary work and collaborated with Youth Focus North East for over a year at this point. At the time I thought it would be more beneficial to 'guarantee' participants by changing my research focus, rather than pursuing the topic of millennial loneliness. However, upon much reflection and swaying between ideas, I was reminded of the unique spatial-temporal context of millennials in County Durham that had first captivated me when designing the project. I therefore made the decision to attempt recruitment without the backing of a gatekeeper at an established organisation, charity, or group, who could make the initial introductions for me. While I was apprehensive about the risk of not attracting any responses, it also meant that I could stay true to the original research plan of exploring loneliness in County Durham millennials.

In my call for participants, I asked for young adults aged between 20 and 35, which was the rough age range of millennials when I conducted the research in 2019, that they lived in County Durham, and had at some point experienced loneliness. The reason I asked for a specific age range, as opposed to millennials, is because I have often found that there has

been confusion over the term. At the time of conducting my research “millennial” was regularly interchangeable with “young people”, or it carried various, negative connotations. I felt that by avoiding millennial in my attempts to recruit, it would remove some of the confusion. I was pleased I did this as in multiple interviews the participants spoke about millennials as if they were not part of that generational cohort, and it could have confused my recruitment process further.

I also did not specify who I would like to speak to in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, disability, class, or anything along the axes of social differentiation. My reasoning for this was twofold. Firstly, as an explorative study I wanted to see what I ‘got back’ in terms of putting a call out that was fairly open. As phenomenology is woven into my conceptual and methodological framework, lived experience is a key element in my research design. I therefore wanted to approach the project with limited preconceptions about who might be lonely. Secondly, as I highlighted in Chapter 2, I am inspired by Wilkinson’s (2020) call for geographies of intimacy, that look for the “queer moments” and (dis)orientations in seemingly ‘normal lives’. I therefore did not want to be too prescriptive in terms of who took part, beyond being in the correct generational cohort, living in County Durham, and having some lived experience of loneliness.

However, despite this, I did need somewhere to start in terms of recruiting people that may be willing to talk to me. Following my engagement with the existing literature, policy documents, and exploration of existing work on tackling loneliness, I had some idea on where, why, and how loneliness might emerge in the everyday lives of millennials. The temporal positioning of millennials was where my interests in postgraduate study first lay as, being a millennial myself, I was both personally and academically interested in the generational inequalities that I outlined in Chapter 1. I imagined that loneliness would occur where vulnerabilities also emerged, exacerbated by the effects of austerity, unemployment, limited opportunities, and the uneven landscape of County Durham.

I therefore mapped out spaces that I imagined my target demographic would occupy. My rationale was that in spaces that offered some form of support, care and community for the issues that are associated with the inequalities faced by both the area and age group, I may find some participants willing to speak to me. I therefore produced posters (see Appendix B) and leaflets (see Appendix C) to distribute within community centres, libraries, community

cafes, support groups, charity 'hubs' and food banks. A full list of the locations can be found in Appendix D.

I distributed the posters and leaflets in early January 2019 and did not get much of a response. I had two people text my research phone asking to take part, having seen my call for participants. However, when it came to phoning them to discuss the research further, one never answered, and the other blocked my number. At this stage of the research, I was becoming very anxious that I would not be able to recruit anyone. My research diary at this point was littered with entries that I "couldn't do it" and the stress I felt at the time is very apparent when I return to these passages now. This speaks to Kristensen and Ravn's (2015: 725) reflection on recruitment as unpredictable, emotionally exhausting and that "embarrassment and faintheartedness [are]...daily partners in a slow recruitment process". They also observe that the subject of recruitment is rarely discussed in length in academic textbooks or journals, arguing that the anxieties and difficulties of recruitment often remain hidden or glossed over. This is why I felt it was important to address my recruitment process so robustly here. The difficulties I faced, and my emotions as a researcher (Bondi, 2005; Gilbert, 2000), shaped my entire experience and understanding of this project.

As a result of these issues, I decided to pursue new ways of recruitment. I sent 50+ emails to various organisations, charities, local government bodies, community centres, and stakeholders asking them to circulate my call for participants among their contacts and service users. I received 18 responses, and these can be seen in Appendix D. Again, the responses were minimal, and I had not made a meaningful contact with anyone for a month.

My final push for recruitment came from posting my call for participants in local Facebook community groups across County Durham. I joined and posted within 38 groups. This proved to be the most successful strategy, and I finally received emails, Facebook messages, texts, and phone calls as soon as I posted in multiple groups. Between February 2019 and September 2019, I posted in each group 5- 10 times. This was because the number of posts these community groups received, and how fast-paced social media can be, meant that posting once would only attract some people who happened to be scrolling through Facebook at that time. I also became attuned to the 'best' times to post for traffic, finding that evenings were most successful in terms of getting a response. While I am aware that this method of recruitment is not inclusive of those who do not have regular access to the

internet, and can only reach people who are already members of the Facebook communities groups, I reconciled this with the fact I had tried different avenues of recruitment before this stage. I was also reminded of Kristensen and Ravn's (2015) argument that there will always be people who are more accessible than others when conducting research:

"No matter how one looks at it, it is an undisputed fact that the persons whose lives, experiences and meaning-making processes researchers are able to study in interview-based projects are those who respond positively to requests for interviews; the rest remain unknown." (Kristensen and Ravn's, 2015: 725)

While posting in online groups remained the most effective recruitment technique, this was not without its challenges. Every time I posted, I had at least one negative comment, if not more. These were often along the lines of "why focus on young people? Older people are more lonely", "why should I bother taking part?" and "is it paid?". I had also posted these calls for participants from my personal Facebook page. My reasoning for this was because I thought it would be best to be open about who I was, and that I was a 'real person'. In hindsight, I should have set up a separate, researcher page in which to post from. While my Facebook profile is private, some photos were open to the public, and it includes some basic details about myself. Though there was not much on there to put my personal safety at risk, this made me feel more uncomfortable when I received messages that could only be described as 'creepy' and unwanted. I also received multiple messages from men that invited me to interview them in their homes and, from the way their messages were phrased, I did not feel safe nor comfortable in meeting them. This highlights England's (1994) argument that researcher positionality and biography is inextricably linked to the fieldwork process. As a result of this, I often dreaded posting my call for participants. This speaks to the ways in which recruitment can be an emotionally draining process for the researcher (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015).

By September 2019, when I completed my data collection, I had received 53 meaningful responses to my call for participants. By meaningful I am referring to individuals who engaged with back-and-forth correspondence, and reached the point where we were arranging an interview time and location. Unfortunately, only 22 of these participants were interviewed. This was due to last minute cancellations, no-shows, or the line of communication going cold as soon as an interview was being arranged. While frustrating at the time, upon reflection I can see this speaks to the research topic and it says more about

loneliness than I first realised. I discuss this more in the next section, where I reflect on the participants, and the ‘non-participants’ who I spoke to during this project.

3.1.3. The participants

As my initial attempts to recruit through support organisations and spaces faltered, it meant that my participants came from a diverse range in backgrounds. At the time I was just relieved that *anyone* had agreed to speak to me, but towards the end of September 2019, when I was wrapping up data collection and preparing to go on maternity leave, I was concerned that my data was disjointed and lacked any meaningful content. Upon my return to studies in October 2020 (and during a global pandemic), these concerns continued as I tried to make sense of my data. It was not until I began my analysis in earnest, which I reflect on in section 3.4, that I began to see the themes that united my participants. I was also able to distinguish ‘clusters’ of participants, who shared similar experiences, and would help me articulate my arguments in the empirical chapters that follow. Table 2 shows the full list of participants who took part in my research. I have used pseudonyms, which were mostly chosen by the participants themselves.

'Name'	Age	Location	Employment Status	Household Profile
James	28	Bishop Auckland	Unemployed/Medically retired	Lives with partner
Emily	31	Murton	Full-time employed – Higher Education	Lives with husband
Abbie	28	Seaham	Full-time parent	Lives with husband and two children
Eve	30	Shotley Bridge	Full-time parent, starting full-time job shortly after interview	Lives with husband and two children
Hannah	23	Gilesgate	MA Student and works part-time in customer service role	Lives with partner
Steph	29	Newton Aycliffe	Full-time employed – primary school teacher	Lives alone
Lily	29	Sacriston	Full-time teaching assistant – on maternity leave at time of interview	Lives with husband and daughter
Holly	36	Consett	Full-time employed – primary school teacher	Lives alone
Adam	20	Spennymoor	Unemployed	Lives with parents and brother
Louise	28	Durham City	Full-time employed – office job	Lives with husband
Sarah	33	Sildon	Unemployed	Lives with partner

Nicola	29	Newton Aycliffe	Full-time employed – secondary school teacher	Lives with mam and siblings
Liam	24	Newton Aycliffe	Student nurse	Lives with dad
Megan	27	Stanley	Unemployed	Lives with husband
Sophie	33	Gilesgate	Owens and works in ‘Doggy Diner’ and part-time in call centre role	Lives with partner
Anna	27	Consett	Full-time employed – office job	Lives with husband
Andy	35	Newton Hall	Full-time employed – lorry driver	Lives alone
Lana	24	Bowburn	PhD student	Lives with partner
Steven	20	Tow Law	IT Apprentice	Lives with dad, step-mam and siblings
Rachel	33	Hartlepool	Part-time employed - primary school teacher	Lives alone
Ashleigh	28	Easington Village	Full-time employed – social worker	Lives alone
Grace	28	Consett	Full-time employed – office job	Lives with partner

Table 2. Participant profiles

Following analysis, I then clustered the participants into thematic groups. The reasoning for this was because I found there to be such diversity in terms of the participant backgrounds, that I found it difficult to thread together their narratives into a cohesive argument.

Therefore, once I had applied my analytical framework to the interview transcripts, personal

community maps, relationship diaries, and (auto)ethnographic notes, I produced four groups of participants. While there is overlap between the groups, and some participants could straddle more than one cluster, I situated the participants in the groups where the themes came through more strongly in their life stories. I outline a brief description for each group below:

- Group 1: Structural barriers and loneliness – this group refers to those participants whose experience of loneliness has emerged from, or been exacerbated by, existing structural inequalities. The barriers referred to here relate to unemployment, disability, physical and mental illness, financial insecurity, and a limited access to services.
- Group 2: Neoliberal adulthood and loneliness – this group of participants reflected on the norms and expectations of adulthood. They each strongly drew on how feeling ‘out-of-sync’ with these representations, and their peers, were key to their narrative of loneliness.
- Group 3: Cultural isolation and loneliness – the participants in this group each shared how they felt other to the area they lived in. Their relationship to their hometown, and County Durham more widely, played an important element to their experience of loneliness.
- Group 4: Fractious relationships and loneliness – this group all expressed that their complex, and often difficult, interpersonal relationships were at the core of their understanding of loneliness.

Group 1: Structural barriers and loneliness	Group 2: Neoliberal Adulthood and Loneliness	Group 3: Cultural Isolation and Loneliness	Group 4: Fractious Relationships and Loneliness
James	Hannah	Lily	Emily
Adam	Steph	Holly	Eve
Sarah	Louise	Sophie	Rachel
Megan	Nicola	Anna	
Steven	Liam	Ashleigh	
Andy	Lana		
	Grace		
	Abbie		

Table 3. Participant Clusters

These groups will be drawn upon in the analytical chapters that follow Chapter 3.

3.1.4. The 'non-participants'

Before I go on to reflect on the methods in practice, and to flesh out my discussion of engaging with the participants above, I want to turn to my experiences with the people I did not end up formally interviewing. As I alluded to in the above section, there were instances where I received consent, and had signed consent forms, but I did not feel it would be ethical to include the information here. There were also multiple messages exchanged with me about the project, about an individual's experience of loneliness, and fairly detailed accounts of their life story via email or Facebook messenger. These messages did not result in an interview, and as soon as I invited them to arrange a date, time, and place to meet, the messages stopped, and I did not hear from them again. As a result, I had many more conversations about millennial loneliness in County Durham than those that can be ethically recorded in this thesis. Rather than considering this a failure, I embrace this as an added element of the research topic. I also argue that it says a lot about the desire to share experiences and emotions with another person, particularly if the individual is isolated and lonely.

In addition to the 22 participants, there were 7 others who I exchanged numerous messages with. From these 7 individuals, I learned a lot about their experience of loneliness, their everyday lives, how loneliness affected them, and what they saw as being the root of these emotions. While I never offered advice or shared much about myself in these exchanges (like I did in the interviews), there was a sense that these individuals were keen to use me as a sounding board, and to express experiences of loneliness that they had never shared with anyone else before. While it was frustrating at the time, I see this as something that has enriched the research process. Even though I have not included any of their stories in this thesis, the testimonies they shared with me have undoubtedly shaped my understanding of loneliness, and the way I have approached the analysis. The eventual silence of these 'non-participants' also speaks volumes. It reinforces to me that shame and stigma is intimately linked to loneliness, and despite the desire to share these experiences, meeting face-to-face and offering up a life story for a PhD can be too much for some.

Prior to each interview I also offered to meet participants for an informal coffee or chat, to provide the opportunity to ask me more questions or to get to know me a little before a

more formal interview. In the later stages of data collection, one person asked to meet me for an informal chat. She told me she had a lot she wanted to share, and that loneliness featured heavily in her life. We met in a local garden centre café, and from the moment I arrived she began to share her life story. While I had made it clear that I would need her to sign a consent form, that I was not recording our conversation, and that this was not a formal interview, she continued to share her personal account of loneliness. I spent two and a half hours with her and felt increasingly uncomfortable about my position as a researcher, and to the extent she was sharing her personal life with me. It was an emotionally draining meeting, and I felt anxious that I had somehow abused my position as a university researcher to gain information from someone for no reason.

She then invited me for a formal interview in her own home, as she did not want to be interviewed in a public place. She told me that she would sign the consent form in advance, which I had given to her earlier, and signed the documents to give me permission to include her account in my thesis. She also warned me that she smoked in her own home and that she had “big dogs” that would jump up at me, asking if I was “afraid of dogs”. I was 8 months pregnant at the time and decided that I did not want to put myself in that situation for the sake of ‘formalising’ the experiences she shared. While I was technically given consent, because she signed this after the meeting, I did not feel comfortable accepting this as informed consent.

These experiences with ‘non-participants’ were frustrating at the time. The emotional labour of hearing upsetting and personal testimonies, combined with the worry that I was somehow abusing my position, was also incredibly draining. I will reflect more in sections 3.3 and 3.4 about the difficulty in hearing distressing life stories. In these circumstances, however, where informed consent was not gained, I left the situations feeling worse. Upon reflection, this is not because I felt as though I had not ‘gained’ something for my research, but it was because I felt uneasy about my role as a researcher overall. I also felt guilt that informed consent was not gained. Now, in writing about these situations with the distance of over three years, I can see that they have shaped my overall understanding of loneliness. It has also taught me a lot about the research process, and that sensitive topics will likely invite challenging situations such as these. Since then, I have worked as a researcher on a project separate to my PhD. This project also produced challenging situations where my position as a researcher felt

blurred. Following my experience from the account above, I felt more equipped to deal with this situation, and could see my growth as a researcher in negotiating challenging situations.

3.2. Methods in practice

3.2.1. *Life story interviews*

In my bid to hear the subjective and intimate experiences of loneliness, I felt it would be most fitting to hear the participant's life story in its entirety. In my early reading around loneliness, which was mostly concentrated in the psychology and health fields, early childhood experiences and attachment styles were commonly connected to incidence of loneliness (Weiss, 1973). Further, research also found that periods of transition were linked to feelings of loneliness (Durham County Council, 2014; Jordan, 2019). The life story interview method, in its pursuit to explore an individual's lifecourse, in their own words, was fitting to my research interests, as well as my theoretical framing. I had also used this method in MA research on '*Emotional Geographies of Millennial Graduates*', and therefore felt more confident in its application and value in eliciting rich and moving testimonies.

As Atkinson (1998: 2) argues, "storytelling is a fundamental form of human connection". It helps people relate to one another and gives insight into how an individual interprets their own stories and construction of reality. There is value in hearing the subjective experiences and meaning-making of people's lives, as it holds a mirror up to broader societal issues (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 15). In order to consider participants as emotional actors, life story interviews are a suited method as they help unveil the personal truths, vulnerabilities and experiences from an individual directly (Atkinson, 1998; Humphrey, 1993; Josselson and Lieblich, 1993). In my pursuit to gather the lived experience of loneliness, and understand loneliness as a social and spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state, this method is well placed to facilitate this.

Though the life story method can be critiqued on the basis that it is too subjective, and that it lacks generalisability beyond the sample of the study (Ritchie et al., 2013), I embrace this quality. Throughout this thesis so far, I have highlighted the value in capturing the subjective, messy, complex, and largely unheard accounts of loneliness. The life story method is well suited to this, and I see it as making the project all the richer for its use. This section has addressed the why of selecting this method. Next, I turn to the method in practice, exploring the where, what, and how of using life story interviews.

3.2.2. *Life story interviews in practice*

The interviews were fairly unstructured. I did go along to each interview with a list of potential questions and prompts (see Appendix E) but found that I only referred to this in situations where the interviewed stalled, or the participant sought more direction in the telling of their life story. The questions I went prepared with were mostly biographical, and linked to home life, employment history, their relationships, growing up, and how they spent most days. I also had a series of questions about loneliness specifically, but it was rarely necessary to ask them as the participants wove their accounts of loneliness into their life story themselves.

I began each interview the same way. I asked them to talk me through their relationship diaries that I sent prior to the interview. I reflect on this method a little more in section 3.2.4. This worked well, as it seemed to ease the tension and formality of the interview as it gave participants something concrete to focus on and talk about. It also felt like a gentle introduction to hearing about their everyday lives, as a ‘warm up’ for the participants to begin talking about themselves. From here, this always sparked a free-flowing narrative by the participant about their life. They added caveats, went on tangents, and explained more about the people and places they encountered in everyday life. From here I said very little, and let the participant guide me through their biographical account and narrative of loneliness.

The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 4 hours, but usually averaged around 2.5 hours. All but one interview was recorded via a dictaphone. I followed each interview with detailed notes and research diary reflections. For the interviewee that did not wish to be recorded, I made extensive notes during and after the interview. He let me know prior to the interview that he did not want to be recorded, and I was apprehensive about this as I was worried it would be difficult to collect reliable and robust data. Instead, I found it to be positive experience. Without the presence of the dictaphone, he was not only more relaxed, and felt more comfortable sharing his story, I also felt less exposed in my phrasing of questions, my pauses and “erms” that often made me feel *less than* as a researcher. This speaks to Nordstrom’s (2015) assertion that recording devices are not neutral, and inevitably affect the data in a multitude of ways. The act of turning on the dictaphone always changed the atmosphere in my interviews. Even though it was slight, and I am pleased with the data I collected, there is no escaping the fact that the dictaphone influenced the interview.

Ratakumwa et al. (2019) conducted a comparative analysis between data recorded with, and without, a dictaphone, and found nothing to suggest that not using a dictaphone is “second best”. They argue that the quality of the data produced is no less robust than if it is recorded. For any future research I will embrace this idea. While recording interviews is inevitably easier, there is much to be said for the quality of the interview without the presence of a dictaphone.

I conducted the interviews in a range of places: people’s homes, cafes, university meeting rooms, and community centres. The majority, however, were conducted in “neutral spaces” such as the café of the participant’s choice (Kruger, 1994). These interview settings usually worked fairly well. I never felt as though the participant was ‘holding back’ in any way because they were in a public space. All the participants were very candid and open with their, often difficult and challenging, life experiences. I also felt a lot more comfortable meeting strangers in a public space, given my positionality as a young woman (Pante, 2014). The only issue I found with this interview location was the noise. When it came to transcribing the interviews those that had been conducted in a café took significantly longer. While they were not illegible, and I was still able to produce verbatim transcripts, it was a much longer process and took up more of my time than I had anticipated.

I conducted 5 interviews in people’s homes. While some others invited me to their homes to conduct the interviews, I made my decision depending on the individual. This was gendered, and I only met with woman – mostly with young children at home. At the time this felt like the safest decision, and I was influenced by the kind of messages I received during recruitment, as I reflected on in section 3.1. At the time of some of the interviews I was also heavily pregnant, and I think this also affected me in terms of how I viewed my personal safety, as I felt more vulnerable. The interviews conducted in people’s homes tended to last longer, and they were definitely more relaxed. For future research I would therefore consider meeting with a wider range of people in their own homes – and not restrict it by gender – but ensure I meet up with them first in a public, neutral setting.

3.2.3. Personal community maps

In each interview I asked the participant to complete a personal community map. Personal community mapping was introduced by Spencer and Pahl (2006) to explore the complex web of interpersonal relationships which individuals are embedded in. The idea was to gain an

understanding of wider society, and how everyday relationships are navigated and understood. To do this, they produced a 'map' made of concentric circles. The centre was where the individual was located, and they plotted their relationships on the map. Those closest to the centre were the most meaningful and important to them, and they worked their way outwards recording relationships based on closeness and importance. I utilised this method in this project, and the personal community map I used can be seen below in figure 2.

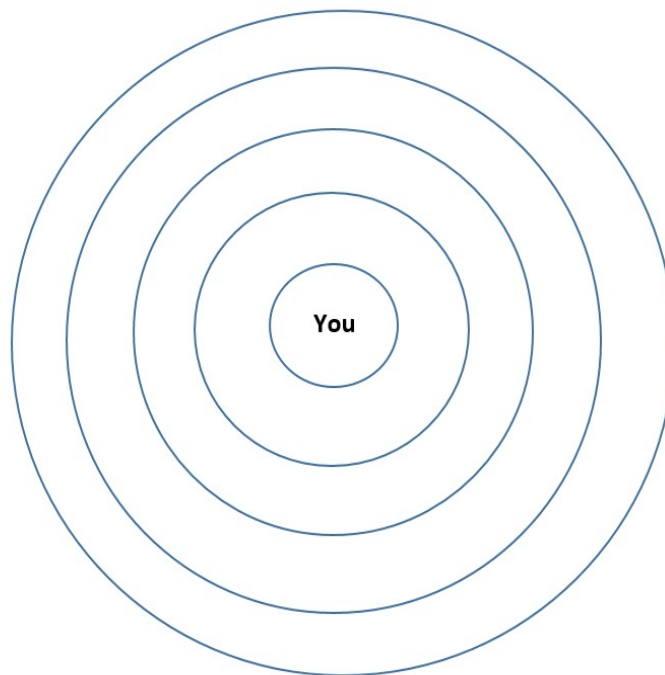


Figure 2. Personal Community Map

Prior to every interview, I sent the personal community map, the relationship diary, and an information sheet to the participant. I gave the participants the option to complete this prior to when we met, or to do it during the interview. I did this so they could familiarise themselves with what I was asking, and to prompt them to think about the different people in their lives. Whether people did this in the interview, or beforehand, was mixed, and I did not feel it created an unnecessary pause or break if it was completed during the interview. In fact, this pause allowed me to collect my thoughts, reflect on what we had discussed so far, and make note of questions I wanted to follow up on.

When I originally decided to use this method, my intention was to gain an understanding of the types of relationships that were important to the participants. Inspired by Spencer and Pahl (2006) I imagined that this method would help me map out the kinds of relationships

and intimacies that were woven into the everyday lives of millennials. While this data did emerge, I have not found it as useful in the write up of this thesis as I had initially imagined. Instead, the task acted as a powerful tool in which to gain a sense of how (dis)connected an individual was, without having to directly ask questions like “do you have any friends?”, “are you lonely?”. I was very wary not to ask such emotive questions, even though it was clear what my research topic was. Using personal community maps therefore worked better than I could have imagined, as it also allowed the participants to talk about the different people in their lives, and it could be used as an anchor to refer to when they spoke about their various relationships and experiences.

The only challenge I encountered in this exercise was the awkwardness felt – both by me and the participant – for those individuals that did not have many people to include on their map. This sounds like an obvious dilemma, especially for a project exploring loneliness, but I was concerned that for these individuals, the task could be upsetting. I tackled this as sensitively as possible, and shared that many other people I had spoken to also did not have many people to include. Whether this was the ‘right’ approach, or not, I attempted to display as much kindness and care as I could, to ease any feelings of shame, stigma, or embarrassment. All the participants said to me upon completion “it doesn’t look much”, even when their maps included numerous relationships. This said a lot to me when I was thinking about the representations of relationships for millennials. It revealed how sensitive the topic could be, and what others assume they should have in terms of relationships as a young adult.

3.2.4. Relationship diaries

I produced a simple ‘average week’ table, including all days of the week, and a section for morning, afternoon, and evening. This can be found in Appendix J. I designed this as a relationship diary, and asked participants to record the people they saw, and the level of contact they had, on an average week. I asked participants to record this information in the week running up to our interview, and send it to me beforehand, if possible. This helped me gain a sense of how (dis)connected the participant was, and to gain a clearer idea of what their everyday life may look like. It also aided me in tailoring some of the questions to the individual. The activity also revealed the temporal crunch points of loneliness, helping me to understand whether there were particular times of day, or specific days, that an individual may feel lonelier. I reflect on this in the empirical chapters that follow. Most of all, however,

its value came from acting as an icebreaker when the interview started. For each interview I asked the participant to start by talking me through their relationship diary. As I have stated earlier in the chapter, this helped give participants something concrete to refer to, as they adjusted to the interview setting. For all 22 interviews, this activity acted as a starting point for their life story to unfold, as they went in their own direction in their sharing of their biography.

3.2.5. (Auto)ethnography of County Durham

As soon as I began designing this project, I was aware that my own positionality as a County Durham millennial could, and should, be utilised. I also became hyper-aware of the issue of loneliness, and the ways in which the unevenness of County Durham could speak to incidence of loneliness. It therefore felt important to conduct an ethnography of County Durham alongside my primary research methods highlighted above. I attended community groups, met with stakeholders, and visited support groups that were tackling loneliness, and encouraging community. While it was impossible to truly understand the subjective experience of loneliness that my participants encountered, I thought it important to attempt to feel what the participants felt, and experience what the participants experienced, when they entered these spaces (Cloke et al., 2004; Crang and Cook, 2007). This included participant observation, participation and informal chats. This data was recorded in my research diary, as I reflected on my thoughts, emotions, and observations.

Goldschmidt (1977: 294) argues that “in a sense, all ethnography, is self-ethnography”, which suggests a blurring between autoethnography and ethnography. While autoethnography embraces researcher position and reflexivity, and it sees the researcher’s experience as enriching the data (Butz and Besio, 2009; Chang, 2008; Shaw, 2013), there is inevitably a connection between my ethnographic reflections, and my personal positionality. I therefore refer to this as my (auto)ethnography of County Durham, to acknowledge the overlap between the two methodological approaches.

Part of my (auto)ethnography was to map out the shrinking access to, and availability of, social infrastructure, public transport, libraries, community centres, and places to just *be*. I did this by engaging with secondary sources like local newspaper articles, local government reports, and reading minutes from local community meetings. I was also able to observe how closures and limited access to the above services affected my everyday life, too. I noticed,

between the period of writing my research proposal in 2016 and as I write this in 2023, that there have been significant changes to how I navigate the spaces of my local area. Fewer buses and reliable trains, the local library only being open for limited times during the week, and the groups I visited in my data collection year (October 2018 – September 2019) no longer running. While these are anecdotal observations, they have helped me to flesh out my understanding of the research area, helping me to relate to the participants. It has also inevitably influenced my analysis, which can be found in the following chapters.

3.3. Reflections from the field and beyond

3.3.1. Positionality

My positionality was not only utilised in the data collection, as I have outlined above, it also influenced the way I related to the participants, the questions I asked, and how I interpreted and analysed their life stories. My identity, personal context, and epistemological positioning thus influenced every aspect of my research, analysis, and writing (England, 1994; 2008; Gilbert, 1994; Katz, 1994; Dyck; McDowell, 1992; Moss, 2002). While in most cases this helped me empathise with the participants, I also had to be careful not to assume complete understanding of their lived experience. In some circumstances I could identify with some experiences recounted in the life stories, but not so with all. It was therefore a delicate balancing act between being open and reflective, and knowing when to be quiet and learn from the participant's life story (Berkovic et al., 2020).

My positionality also went through several transitions across the entirety of the research process. A County Durham millennial; a researcher; someone who had experienced worries about unemployment, financial (in)security, and what adulthood looked like; and, when it came to analysis, a mother who understand the loneliness and isolation of maternity leave. These shifting positions have inevitably meant that the power relations between researcher and researched, have also been fluid and carefully negotiated (Chacko, 2004). As I have made it clear throughout this chapter, I thus embraced the subjectivity of this study, and wove it into my understanding, analysis, and reflections. My aim that underpinned the complexities, subjectivities and – in some ways – messiness of this project was to uncover the unheard stories of loneliness which, as Moss (1993: 49) highlights, is the “political aim of feminism”. This was therefore key to this feminist methodology.

As I reflected in the above sections, my gender also played a part in both the recruitment and interview process. The decisions who to meet, who to interview, and where to interview were not only affected by my gender, but also the gender of the participant. While collecting the data was important to me, I also prioritised my own safety and comfort. With the project being so explorative, not working with a gatekeeper, and calling for participants from a diverse range of backgrounds on social media, it was difficult to ensure the legitimacy and the intentions of those asking to meet with me. I therefore cannot avoid that this research, and the voices within it, have not been influenced by my positionality in this way. I met one participant in her own home who had agoraphobia and thus found it very difficult to leave her own home. While I did not encounter any men asking me to meet in their own homes due to disability, health, or mobility, I do wonder if I would have met in those circumstances. I therefore feel a sense of guilt that there has been an element of bias in the collection of data. As I have continued to reflect on this, and at the time of writing, I still feel conflict as I sway between concern that I have done the 'wrong thing', and consoling myself that I prioritised my own sense of wellbeing at the time. Further, it exemplifies the grey areas of the research process, and the ways in which the identity of the researcher can never be fully removed from the project itself.

There was also an element of being an insider/outsider in this research. Growing up and living in County Durham myself, there were many ways I could relate to the participants. There were, however, also a multitude of ways that I was unable to identify with their own experiences of County Durham. Further, there is also the sense that I have never really left the field. There have been a handful of occasions where I have seen people I have interviewed out and about, which at times felt awkward when my position as a researcher shifted to *being me* as I carried out my own everyday tasks. This is reflected upon by Hall (2019) who notes that the spatial dynamics of researching on your doorstep can mean that the everyday lives of researchers and participants may intersect. With this, I have often felt that I have never really stopped collecting data, as my (auto)ethnography of County Durham continues, and I occasionally exchange greetings as I pass participants in the street. The decision to research County Durham therefore meant that I was already immersed in the field and, in many ways, continue to be (Reed-Danahay, 2009).

3.3.2. Ethical challenges

While I sought high-risk ethical approval before collecting my data, this did not mean that I was not constantly reassessing the ethics of my research within, and beyond, the field (Talbert, 2018). When meeting with participants, particularly those who appeared most vulnerable, I was worried about their wellbeing and often felt helpless that I could not help in some way. This was always felt most strongly at the end of the interview, particularly when I was aware that they did not have anything else planned, or anyone else to talk to, for the rest of the day. This usually resulted in me lingering for a while and chatting with them more generally. I felt acutely aware that I did not want to get up and leave straight away. Yet I was also conscious that I was not there to be a friend or support system. The more interviews I did, I learnt to spend some time chatting, and offering a list of contacts I had collated for groups and organisations that offered support, community and care. I was also reassured by the fact that multiple participants told me that they felt better just sharing their experiences with me. This speaks to my intentions in designing a feminist, phenomenological and relational methodology. By not only embracing the subjectivities, unheard voices, lived experiences, and interdependencies of the participants and their narratives of loneliness, I also sought to create a space in the interview that was genuinely compassionate. I hoped that the expression of difficult experiences would be in some way cathartic and receiving feedback from some participants that it was, helped me reconcile some of ethical reservations I had.

The power afforded to me as a PhD researcher from Newcastle University also led me to some ethically challenging situations. There was one support group I attended that was aimed at encouraging a community for women in the local area. I rang the woman who facilitated the support group beforehand to ask her about the group, shared what my research was about, and asked if it would be Ok for me to go along. She assured me it would be fine and that I was welcome to come along to observe, participate and speak to the women. When I was there, however, it was clear that I was out of my depth. I felt uncomfortable about the level of access I was given to the lives of vulnerable women. The facilitator encouraged the women to speak to me one on one about their experiences in private. No context was given who I was and why I was there – although I did state this when I spoke to the women alone. The women then proceeded to share sensitive, upsetting and traumatic information with me, with one referring to me as “professional who could help

them". I again reiterated who I was, and I told the facilitator that I had to leave. I again repeated what my research was about, who I was, and that I would not share anything about what the women had told me.

This situation left me feeling uncomfortable for a long time afterwards and I felt as if I had done something wrong by accessing this space. I did not record any of the conversations, make notes, or reflect on the content of those conversations in my field notes or research diary. The experience itself, however, taught me a lot about researching sensitive topics and the power and status that can be connected to being a university researcher. It is an experience that I reflected on throughout my PhD research, and beyond, as I consider my position as a researcher, my right to access certain spaces, and to be clear and assertive with my position and my intentions.

In the next section, which is the final section of this chapter, I draw on my approach to analysing the data. I outline my choice of analysis, my application of it, and make some reflections on how my maternity leave and Covid-19 have influenced the analytical process.

3.4. Analysis

3.4.1. Narrative analysis

Using narrative analysis to analyse my data felt like the obvious choice, given the collection of life stories. As Esin (2011) states, narratives are powerful forms of giving meaning to experience. Narratives are not an expression of independent realities in a vacuum, they help to construct the reality of the relationship between the narrator and the external world. They are produced by social and spatial interactions with others. When individuals produce narratives of their lives, they use public narratives available in their culture to make sense of them (Esin, 2011; Mattingly and Garro, 2000; Wiles et al., 2004). This connects with my relational approach to interpreting and analysing the data, as I seek to understand not only the lived experience of millennials, but how they speak to broader, overarching narratives of adulthood, emotion and relationships. Atkinson et al. (2003) note that narrative analysis is the:

"creative means of exploring and describing realities, which are arranged and bound in time. While interpreting the individual narratives, analysts take into account the individual and cultural resources people use to construct their narratives, as well as the interpersonal or organisational functions of narratives." (Atkinson et al., 2003: 117)

Narrative analysis therefore helps reveal the spatialities and temporalities of an individual life story, and weaves it together with the context in which it sits. There are multiple ways in which to conduct a narrative analysis, as it can be used to consider the structure, content, and context, in isolation or in combination (Esin, 2011). Here, I address all three, while also embracing the sighs, pauses, tone, subject-changes, and interpretation of questions, as I take a holistic approach to the life story. To do this, I am inspired by two approaches in particular.

First, I followed Riessman (2008) by writing up a biography for each interview. This helped me to develop a chronology from each transcript, and to ensure that I analysed the narrative as a whole. This is something that has been important to me, and I outline this in my own analytical framework in table 4. Second, I adopted Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) "voice-centred relational method" which is an attempt to:

"translate [a] relational ontology into methodology and into concrete methods of data analysis by exploring individuals' narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to themselves, their relationships to the people around them, and their relationships to the broader social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live." (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 9)

This relates to my understanding of loneliness as a social and spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state. By taking on board Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) approach to narrative analysis, I was able to analyse my data within the context of my conceptual understanding of the topic. Table 4 below outlines my approach to narrative analysis and how I have applied it here.

Analytical Framework	
Initial Stages	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transcribed recorded interviews verbatim - Multiple readings of transcripts and re-listening to audio recordings - Collation of transcripts, personal community maps, relationship diaries, field notes, and research diary entries for each participant into one document 	
Analytical Stages	Focus of Analysis
1: Plots, sub-plots, events, recurring images	Asking what I am being told in the interview: what are the experiences the participant draws on? What are the key moments? What is the overall narrative of the individual?
2: The way interviewee engages – tone, pauses, emotions	Exploring how the participant responds to the questions, the silences, the pauses, the interpretation of my questions. Acknowledging the emotional response to their life story, experiences, the interview, me.
3: My position	What are my interpretations? How do I identify with the life story? How do I relate to the participant, their story, their emotions, and their experiences? How do I write myself into their story, and understand it from my point of view? What are my feelings towards their story?
4: Social relations	Who are the people in their life and how do they talk about them? Exploring the everyday relationships – both fleeting and meaningful. Who is in their personal community?
5: Spatial relations	How does the participant talk about and engage with their environment?

	Attachments? Exclusions? Indifference? Imagined geographies?
6: Broader Context	What is the broader social, cultural, economic and political context? What are the larger structures they live within and draw on, whether consciously or unconsciously. Drawing out the overarching narratives and contexts that the participant uses to make sense of their world and everyday life.
Following each stage and read through above, I did the following:	
A. For each participant, I made a biographical plot line, where I plotted the life events and key biographical moments that they had shared with me in chronological order. This was to help make sense of, and order, their narrative. The key transitional moments and life events were also highlighted more clearly in this process.	
B. A summary document was produced for each participant. Using the notes from the above analytical process, the personal community maps, the relationship diaries, field notes, and research diary reflections. By combining everything it helped give an overall image of the participant's life, my position as a researcher, and the context of the interview itself. Within this document, the key themes of the life story emerged.	

Table 4. Analytical Framework

3.4.2. Limitations to this approach

The reading, re-reading, and (re)crafting of participant narratives into individual documents is not without its limitations. Firstly, it was a time-consuming process. While it could be frustrating at times, it did enable me to become absorbed in my data, and to feel connected to each individual life story. The analysis helped me to reflect on my own position, and to reflect on the ways I might have affected the data collection, or was influencing the analysis and interpretation. Esin (2011) states that this is one criticism that narrative analysis can be charged with – that it is too subjective. It could be argued that the narrative that the analyst unpicks, interprets, and *finds* may not be how the narrator intended. The life experience and

positionality of the researcher is thus imposed onto the data. I challenge this suggestion, however. In practice I have embraced the subjectivity, messiness, and complexity of the researcher-researched relationship in this project. Incorporating my own positionality has been important to crafting the feminist elements of my methodology, and I see this as being the strength of my data collection and analytical approach.

3.4.3. The disconnect between data collection and data analysis

As I have already stated, my data collection was completed in September 2019 and was followed by a year of maternity leave. This distance between data collection and analysis would be challenging enough, but I returned to my studies during a global pandemic. While my data remained 'protected' from the impacts of Covid-19 in the sense that I had already collected it, the reverberations influenced my wellbeing, approach to the data, and the timeframe in which this project has been completed. I drew on the ways that my personal biography had been *disrupted* in Chapter 1, and I go on to argue how this understanding of my experiences helped frame the analysis that led to Chapter 4.

When I returned to my studies, I was concerned that my data now felt irrelevant, given that everyone seemed to be talking about loneliness in the context of Covid-19 and physical distancing measures. I was worried that there was little to be *said* with my data, as if it had occurred in a completely different time that no longer mattered. However, as I write this in mid-2023, and with some distance from lockdown and its associated measures, I can see that there is still value in my findings and research. As Hall (2021) argues, Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. I, too, have found this in a separate research project I have worked on exploring the maternal geographies and care practices in lockdown (Kelly, 2022). I found that lockdown had stretched the time spaces of those most vulnerable *more thinly*, putting them under greater strain than before. My PhD research, as I go on to argue in the following chapters, too, highlights that loneliness can persist in the everyday lives of the most vulnerable in society. The presence of Covid-19 in this research could therefore be interpreted as *yet another* layer which speaks to the geographies of loneliness. The pandemic has therefore inevitably shaped my analysis and project, as it has helped me understand, to an even greater degree, the delicate and precarious knife-edge, which so many in society are situated. I expand on these ideas further in Chapter 7, in the thesis discussion and conclusion.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the *doing* of this research. I have highlighted how I have crafted a feminist, phenomenological and relational methodology that values the lived experience and subjectivity of loneliness. This methodology has also embraced my positionality, as I draw on the ways that I have written myself into this thesis and utilised it in a way to relate to my participants, understand the data, and write about it in a compassionate and empathetic way. Data was collected through life story interviews, personal community maps, relationship diaries, and an (auto)ethnography of County Durham. All of which I reflect on in terms of their selection, challenges, and their value in producing rich, emotive testimonies from the participants. I have also outlined my analytical framework, and how there has been a disconnect between data collection and data analysis. A period of maternity leave and the Covid-19 pandemic have unquestionably influenced my understanding of the data, the analysis, and the findings that follow in the remaining chapters. Overall, this chapter has reflected on the slow, frustrating, challenging, enjoyable, interesting, upsetting, exciting process of collecting data. It has highlighted the journey I have been on to collect the data, learn to be a researcher, and to navigate the grey areas and ethical dilemmas of conducting qualitative research on a sensitive topic such as loneliness.

Chapter 4. Disrupted Biographies of Millennials in County Durham: Exploring Geographies of Loneliness on the Macro Scale

This chapter is the first of three empirical chapters that explore my data. To begin, I approach the geographies of loneliness for County Durham millennials from the macro scale.

Contextualised in Chapters 1 and 2, the macro scale refers to measures and decisions made by central government, as well as the norms, values and expectations that are (re)produced by neoliberal policies, that impact on everyday, social and emotional lives. Here I argue that these overarching structures coincide with the particular social geography of County Durham and create a landscape that allows loneliness to persist.

Using this scale and the temporal-spatial position of being a millennial in County Durham, this chapter engages with the concept of disrupted biographies. The idea of having a disrupted biography was first sparked when I considered my own positionality as a millennial living in County Durham. The way my biography – and this thesis – has been disrupted by Covid-19 was reflected upon in Chapters 1 and 3. This helped shape my understanding of the emotional geographies of adulthood. The concept outlines how events across the lifecourse can cause someone to feel as if their life has taken an unexpected turn (Bury, 1982). This links to how an individual believes their life *should* be lived, which is shaped by pervasive neoliberal, heteronormative norms and expectations. This acts as a backdrop to how an individual understands and creates their own narrative, seeing it as disrupted if they do not follow what is culturally and socially perceived as the norm (Kim, 2015; Polkinghorn, 1988). This can have an *unsettling* affect, altering how an individual anticipates their present and future. Here, I apply this concept to unpick how the spatial-temporal positioning of County Durham millennials, alongside the social and cultural norms attached to young adulthood, can lead to biographical disruptions.

I argue that feelings of loneliness can emerge from these disruptions, and these disruptions can be fostered by existing feelings of loneliness. This chapter thus explores the complex relationship between loneliness and biographical disruption, as articulated by participants who took part in this research. Given that this is explored on the macro scale, there are a multitude of ways that the participants voiced their experiences as being connected to broad, overarching norms and structures. The participants were therefore selected from

across the participant clusters that I introduced in Chapter 3. I will contextualise this more throughout the chapter.

To begin, this chapter will explore how power and time coincide in section 4.1. Here, I address the ways in which structural, governmental decisions, policies and norms on the macro scale filter down and disrupt biographies, ultimately impacting the everyday lives and experiences of individuals. It will consider how structural inequalities that arise from the uneven geography of County Durham exacerbate disempowerment. Participants feel *stuck* in a society that values *moving forward* and *progression*, despite the structural barriers they may face (Bauman, 2005).

Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 draw on this *waiting time-space*, as I refer to it here, to explore how encountering this position can be expressed as frustration, exasperation, despondency and abandonment. This shows how power on the macro scale speaks to both the biographical time as well as the everyday, temporal experiences of millennials in this study. Each section will explore how this sensation of waiting can be encountered differently. Section 4.1.1 draws on the stories of participants who experienced waiting as a dead end, a block, and a feeling of being left behind. Section 4.1.2 engages with testimonies of participants who feel they are in a vicious cycle and have a sensation of being farcically passed around without resolution, unable to move on or 'uninterrupt' their biography. Section 4.1.3 will follow, which discusses how feelings and spaces of (un)care play a crucial role when acknowledging the relationship between power, time and loneliness.

Section 4.2 continues to explore how biographies can feel disrupted, and what this means for the geographies of loneliness, but will focus more sharply on the social and cultural value of time. It will explore how time-spaces are unevenly encountered, with expectations of biographical milestones only attainable and accessible to some and not others (Bastian et al, 2020; Sharma, 2014; Wanka, 2020). It will address how the spatial-temporal context of County Durham millennials can lead to difficulty accessing specific milestones such as home ownership, financial security, marriage, and having children. This has the further potential to induce feelings of not being *good enough* and has been articulated in this research as contributing to feelings of loneliness. This section will also critique these norms, exploring the testimonies of participants who reject these expectations and norms and what this means for their experience of young adulthood and loneliness.

4.1. Power and time

4.1.1. “Hitting a dead end”: blocks to progress

In this section I draw on the life stories of two participants: Adam and James. Both Adam and James are positioned in ‘Group 1’ of my participant clusters outlined in Chapter 3. They each expressed their experiences of loneliness as being strongly linked to structural barriers – in terms of employment, financial security, access to appropriate healthcare, and living circumstances. Their circumstances and narratives of loneliness are thus well positioned in a section engaging with the relationship between power and time.

When considering what it means to be *blocked* from *progress*, it is important to consider what, exactly, is the end goal or direction in which an individual is orientated towards. This is addressed in Chapter 2, and while there are variances between the participants who took part in this study, these directions, destinations, goals and milestones are all largely along heteronormative, neoliberal lines. While this can be critiqued, and will be later in the chapter, it is important not to dismiss or deny that these wants, goals and hopes are important to the wellbeing and sense of self of the people I spoke to. Further, many of the *destinations* that the participants were disrupted from reaching were far from being merely aspirational. Instead, they were, for them, foundational aspects of everyday life, such as financial stability, security, and good health and support. Exploring this idea of *hitting a dead end*, I will first turn to Adam’s story:

Adam is 20 years old, is unemployed, and lives with his parents and brother in Spennymoor, County Durham. He has mental and physical health issues and describes himself as disabled. He had attended sixth form straight from school, but due to his ill health and missing an exam, he was removed from the course. He left this sixth form and attended a different college, where he developed a keen interest in photography on his media course. Adam spends as much time as he can on this hobby, but it is expensive and is therefore limited as to how much he can pursue it. Adam has not worked since leaving college two years ago. He tells me this is due to his physical and mental health issues, which he has been receiving support for during this time. In addition to this, he does not feel that there are any available jobs in the local area that he could manage with his disabilities. He has a strained relationship with his family, mainly his dad, and is keen to move to his own accommodation. He had attempted to move into some assisted accommodation, but the apartments made

available to him were either too crowded, or the corridors and stairways were too narrow or inaccessible. This meant they were not appropriate for his needs. He was placed on a waiting list and then removed as he tried to pursue privately rented accommodation, which he also cannot afford at the moment. Adam tells me he is single and does not have any friends, and spends every day at home alone.

As Adam told his story, he gave the impression that he saw his life as a series of *stops* rather than *starts*, and this was particularly articulated in relation to education, employment, independent living, and the idea of a romantic relationship. Whenever he seemed to get *going*, such as when he applied for accommodation, started his sixth form course, or tried to pursue his creative interests, he was *blocked* from progressing on account of his health, his disabilities, or his finances. He spoke of “hitting a dead end” and that “nothing’s easy”, and the air and tone of our interview was one of hopelessness and helplessness. Further, the way he spoke about his experiences gave me the impression that he blamed himself for these *stops* and *disruptions* to his biography – or, rather, a disruption to a biography he imaged for himself.

This was demonstrated in his comments about adulthood and responsibility:

“I certainly think that a lot of people would probably think I should be taking more responsibility around the house but it’s not necessarily easy for me to do so – because they don’t understand the physical or mental health – because I have so many issues with that. And I know I should be taking more responsibility around the house and I have started to do that. I’ve started doing my own shop and stuff. The only problem with that is that I have to use my own money and I don’t have a lot of money because I don’t have a job. I’m on benefits but that’s not always guaranteed. The benefit process is certainly a stressful one. It could be better.”

In the quote above, Adam is drawing on this idea of responsibility and how he believes he should be doing more in terms of domestic and financial contribution towards the family home. The way he phrased this also came across in such a way that suggested he was pained by his inability to contribute in a way he saw as appropriate or successful – even while acknowledging that it is made more difficult for him due to his health. The fact that he draws on how “a lot of people” would perceive him suggests he is aware of societal norms and expectations of adulthood, as well as the infantilising discourses surrounding those who receive benefits. This has the potential to act as another block – in terms of his self-esteem,

his sense of worth, and evidence that he receives little understanding and compassion directed towards him or his circumstances.

When he referred to peers and former friends from school he told me “a lot of them have moved on with their lives and I’m struggling” and when I asked what he meant about them having “moved on” he said, “it’s like...getting a job, starting a family...that sort of stuff.” It struck me that he focused so strongly on not being married, having children, his own accommodation, and a job, when he was only twenty years old at the time of the interview. While this could be connected to the norms and expectations of the area he lives (which is drawn on in Chapter 5), it could also be due to what he sees as ‘successful adulthood’ that is reinforced in neoliberal, heteronormative society. Further, it speaks to the “public stories” of relationships (Jamieson, 1998) where specific relationships are valued. I advance on this and add that such public stories, and norms, of relationships, can feed into self-esteem and a sense of self. With Adam feeling *other* to his peers and, in a sense disorientated (Ahmed, 2006), his biography may feel disrupted within a very narrow understanding of what adulthood relationships *should* look like. His *blocks to progress* are thus filtered through relational expectations on the macro scale. These ideas are advanced on in section 4.2. I will return to Adam’s lifestory but, first, I introduce James:

James, 28, lives in Bishop Auckland with his partner. He lost his sight suddenly at the age of 21 and has not been able to work since. He receives Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) as he is technically considered able to work, but the jobs in the local area are not appropriate regarding his health and ability. He does have close friends, family and a partner, and is also actively involved with the local youth theatre group, but his days are spent mostly on his own as everyone he knows goes out to work. He is keen to meet new people, make friends and fill his days, but each time he attends a support group or community class, funding is stopped and he is back to spending time alone in the house again.

James’ story differs to Adam’s in that his experience of being *blocked, paused*, and placed in a waiting time-space began very abruptly and unexpectedly when he lost his sight 7 years ago. Prior to this, he had had multiple full-time jobs since school and had an active social life. He told me “because of the age I lost my sight, I often feel I stopped at 21...so like...sometimes I think that, erm, the last 7 years or so...I’ve been 21 for 7 years and I never really got past that”. For James it is therefore as though the clock has been stopped, and he

is within a time-space that has paused him at the age he lost his sight. He draws on how he struggles to conceptualise his temporal positioning on the lifecourse, and how his biography has been disrupted:

“Am I someone who’s 30⁵ with experience since I was 18? Or am I 30 with experience until I was 21? Because everything...like if I tried to go back into employment now – my CV is blank for the last 7 years, which instantly flags up – why has he not been in work for 7 years? Why does he have no references? Has he been in prison? – no I’ve been blind. Erm so I think that – like for me – it would be very hard to go back erm because I would have SO many hurdles to overcome and yes I may be able to see again which is the big one but if I have no way of explaining that adequately to an employer then...yeah it’s going to be hard. Also if I go back into theatre, a lot of my skills are 7 years out of date now – a lot of things have happened in the last 7 years and I would have to start at the bottom again. Or do a hell of a lot of research very quickly...erm...so I think it would be....it’s almost like I’ve started a second life so like sometimes that from 21 until now is kind of like a side quest in a game sort of thing and the rest of it...life is just passing by sort of thing.”

This idea of being on a “side quest” and life “passing by” speaks to the way that a disruption has manipulated the time-space that James occupies. Faced with such a life changing event, other aspects of his life such as financial stability, a job, a social life, and, crucially, a sense of independence, have also been placed on pause, as he feels life in ‘real time’ is bypassing him. His conceptualization of being on a side quest in a game also suggests there is a ‘main game’ that he is no longer part of, that other people can engage in, and he is blocked from:

“...other people who’ve gone off got married, had kids that sort of thing...erm whereas I am not the same person I was at 21 but there’s elements that haven’t changed so I’m still...at 21 it’s very much ok you’ve got a job, keep yourself in a job and pretty much not long after that move out sort of thing. Get your own house, get your own car, have your family by the time you’re 30 and so on. Erm that’s not something that ever occurred to me. And now my girlfriend keeps on at me that she wants to be married sort of ... but there’s an element that I still think I’m still 21 in some places – I’m 21 I don’t want to...oh wait I’m 28 – but even at 28 I’m not thinking about being married. Not because it’s her – but because it’s that part of me still think I’m still 21 and there’s lots of other things to do with my life first...”

⁵ James is 28 years old. In this quote he refers to himself as 30 in order to ‘round up’ when discussing his life story and experience.

James draws on the ways that he sees people his own age engaging with 'life', and how his own disruption has prevented him from feeling ready for these stages whilst also acknowledging what he feels he should be doing at his life stage to justify life as a 28 year old. Both James and Adam draw on similar life stages and expectations of adulthood that they feel they are blocked from engaging with in some way. Here it could be said that the neoliberal norms and expectations in society – these ideals on the macro scale – have filtered down and are structuring the way they view themselves, and how they experience their everyday lives.

Further, their spatial-temporal positioning could also be said to further entrench these issues, increasing this waiting time-space they find themselves within. Both James and Adam are unable to find appropriate work on account of their health issues and disabilities. They are both classed as 'fit to work' and therefore only receive the lower welfare payment of ESA (as opposed to PIP⁶). This means that they have limited funds and are less financially stable and secure, as well as having to spend time and energy applying for unsuitable work they cannot do. Not only does this highlight the way the government exerts pressure and control through hostile 'universal worker' (Acker, 1990) expectations and bureaucratic processes designed to make welfare claims punitive. It also reveals the uneven geography of the labour market in terms of what jobs are available to people like Adam and James in County Durham.

The impact of this is succinctly explained by James when he describes what loneliness means to him – "it's becoming me". For James, his encounters with people and places are reduced, his world is becoming smaller. He articulates his experience spatially by describing the feeling of loneliness as an almost insidious force that is taking over and occupying all aspects of his life. The 'blocks' he has encountered that places him in a waiting time-space have enabled this sense of being 'taken over' by loneliness. While it is difficult to ascertain what *comes first* regarding loneliness and the circumstances leading to feeling *blocked* and *paused*, arguably there is a complex relationship between feeling lonely and feeling blocked from moving forwards. Further, these blocks, in the case of Adam, James, and others within this project, reveal the ways in which their spatial-temporal positioning as millennials in County Durham can disrupt biographies and impact on the ways their everyday lives are navigated and experienced.

⁶ Personal Independence Payment.

Here, I offer my concept of a relational geography of loneliness to make sense of the idea that loneliness is *taking over*. As I outlined in Chapter 2, Holton et al.'s (2022) concept of "spatial anxieties", where loneliness infiltrates relationships, can be advanced on here. My understanding of a relational geography of loneliness is that loneliness can (re)produce, shrink, expand and manipulate socio-spatial relationships. Therefore, with James expressing that loneliness is "becoming" him, there is the suggestion that loneliness is not only affecting his social and spatial relationships, but also producing a space in itself. As a result, this space begins to infiltrate other aspects of the participants' lives. Being situated in a waiting time-space, and finding one's biography disrupted, thus provides fertile ground for a relational geography of loneliness to be conceptualised.

4.1.2. *"Stuck in a vicious cycle": waiting as movement*

Adam's and James' stories capture how structural inequalities and neoliberal norms (on the macro scale) can be experienced as *blocks* which disrupts biographies that are exacerbated by the spatial-temporal position of being a millennial in County Durham. The stories in this section, from Megan and Sarah, are similar in that they capture how this position can put a strain on how everyday life is experienced and navigated, ultimately leading to feelings of loneliness. Also positioned in group 1 of the participant clusters, Megan and Sarah, too, articulate their biographical disruptions as feeling paused, waiting, and stuck. Instead of describing this waiting time-space as a block, however, they draw on it as a "vicious cycle". This depicts another way that power and time coincide, which is here seen as a sensation of being *passed around*, permanently *waiting*, finding no resolution, and *ending back where they started*. The different ways these waiting time-spaces are navigated – either as blocks or as a vicious cycle – are not drawn on here to suggest that one is worse than the other, rather it is a way to explore how everyday time-spaces are manipulated on the macro scale, and how differently they can be felt and lived on the everyday scale. I will first turn to Megan's story where she describes being in a "vicious cycle":

Megan is 27 years old and lives in Stanley, County Durham with her husband. She has lived here all of her life and, until a year ago, had worked in the same job since leaving school. Megan has agoraphobia, as well as having a range of other complex mental and physical health conditions, which makes it difficult for her to leave the house. As a result of her health, she had to leave her job of 8 years, and is currently receiving ESA. At the time of our interview she was in the process of applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP). Megan has a

strong, local network of family in her hometown, and sees them as much as she can. She tells me she has no friends and had struggled with bullying at school, which means she finds it difficult to trust people and build relationships with others. Most of her days are spent alone in the house, but she has recently started to attend a twice-weekly craft class that supports women's mental health.

Much of Megan's life story centred on this idea of waiting. In terms of her health, her access to healthcare, and frustrated efforts to receive the correct welfare payments that she is entitled to. The way she articulated these disruptions and periods of waiting connected to this idea of being caught in a cycle. She had both physical and mental health issues which compounded one another that meant treatment and/or management was a long and complex process. She shared that her health was what made her feel lonely:

“so I mean the physical health side comes into making iz feel lonely as well because I can't get out of the house sometimes, physically, and if it's not the physical health, it's the mental health so I'm kind of stuck in a vicious cycle at the moment”.

In addition to this, the start of treatment and subsequent management of her conditions was drawn out and she was on long waiting lists, as well as waiting to see if current medication and recent procedures had worked before moving on to the next stage of treatment. In speaking to Megan, there was a sense that it was one thing after another, that she was frustrated, and that this vicious cycle she described was holding her in a time-space that not only disrupted her biography (her ability to move on) but was exacerbating her feelings of loneliness.

In addition to her health disrupting her biography, her spatial-temporal position as a millennial in County Durham also meant that access to appropriate healthcare has been negatively impacted by austerity and deep cuts to public services (as contextualised in Chapter 1). While Megan sensitively acknowledged that these extended periods of waiting were a result of austerity cuts, she told me that she also did not want to complain because she knew “how hard pushed they are as well”. Though this shows that Megan directs the blame where it is deserved (central government who have orchestrated the cuts), it does not negate the difficulty and frustration that she felt on the everyday scale. It also adds to the sense of powerlessness that being in this waiting time-space can bring, where she sees it as futile to complain or raise her concerns. In speaking to Megan, there was a sense that it was

one thing after another, and this vicious cycle that she describes links to ideas around her waiting time-space and biographical disruption being experienced as a sensation of being not only powerless, but also *passed about* as she waits for care and support from a variety of overstretched departments.

Megan's perception of being in a vicious cycle is shared by Sarah, whose story is explored below:

Sarah is 33 years old and lives in Shildon, County Durham. She is currently unemployed and is desperately hoping to find work. The jobs available to her in the local area – and that she has had in the past – are mainly agency based, temporary roles. Two weeks prior to the interview, Sarah was let go from her job in a factory. She has volunteered in the past – in food banks, allotments – in order to gain new skills to assist in her search for work, and as a way to meet new people and make friends. She told me she found these voluntary roles difficult at times as she encountered people who would argue, shout, and create conflict, which made her feel unsafe and uncomfortable. This meant she didn't return. She tells me that she has struggled with mental ill health for several years and has constantly been in and out of contact with mental health services, including counselling and a period of hospitalisation. Her contact with mental health support seems to be 'patchy', and she feels she is constantly being discharged and deemed 'well', only to be placed on waiting lists to be seen by a different service or team. Sarah tells me she is very lonely and believes that if only she could find work, she would be able to break the vicious cycle that she feels she is in. She sees a job as a way to retrieve a sense of identity, as well as provide her with the structure that she sees as positive to her mental health. A job would give Sarah the opportunity to make new friends. She tells me that if she found a job, everything else would follow. Her mental health would improve; she'd feel more positive about herself; she'd 'gain' an identity; and she'd make friends. She would therefore not feel lonely anymore.

Whether or not gaining employment would be the panacea for Sarah's loneliness and disrupted biography, she placed great importance on how having a job would make a difference in terms of her wellbeing and sense of purpose. The difficulty in finding work is closely linked to the area in which she lives, as the jobs available to her are mostly agency and temporary based roles. Sarah was let go from this type of role only a couple of weeks prior to our interview, and she told me that they had let her go because of bruising on her

arm. It was unclear what their reasoning for this was, but Sarah implied that bruising, which was a result of having the contraceptive implant fitted, had meant she was let go as they believed she was injured and could therefore not carry out the physical role she was hired for.

“I think the problem is, is that agencies know – they’ve got so many people going into work that they don’t care. There is nothing concrete round here...and that makes it so difficult for anyone in Shildon to gain relationships or secure work because you’re so disposable...they wonder why so many people are on benefits. Because there is nothing secure. While these agencies just let off people left, right and centre...for any reason they see fit. It could be the silliest reason. It wasn’t an injury, it was an implant. Every normal woman who gets it has bruising. It’s not abnormal [laughs]...That’s the major problem. Everywhere else is like...I’ve never ever got a permanent job that’s in this area. Nothing concrete. Nothing permanent. It’s all mainly agency. And anything permanent...erm I’ve never heard back from. Never ever. I’ve tried everything. Lidl, Asda, Aldi, Greggs, Tesco...”

Sarah’s repeated references to being disposable, that nothing is concrete, and nothing is secure, highlights this sense of insecurity she feels when attempting to find work. There is also a sense that seeking work is futile, as the agencies “churn” through employees and dismiss them for “any reason”. This again links back to this image of a ‘vicious cycle’ that not only Sarah faces, but those who are attempting to gain secure employment in Shildon. With Sarah having such a focus on employment and equating this to everything else *falling into place*, this insecure cycle is not only frustrating, but also disrupting her biography by holding her in this waiting time-space that is only exacerbated by her spatial-temporal positioning as a millennial in County Durham.

Shildon is a small town in County Durham. It is fairly rural, and Sarah tells me that to get to the nearest cities and larger towns (such as Bishop Auckland, Darlington and Durham) you would mostly need to have access to a car. There is public transport, but this is patchy, expensive, unreliable and only runs a limited service, meaning that doing shift work would be hard as buses would not run very early in the morning or late at night. Sarah’s car had also been off the road for the last two and a half months, which meant she had not really been anywhere, and it made her search for work harder and more complicated. This rurality, the difficult in accessing reliable transport, and the prevalence of insecure, temporary work in

the local area means that the uneven geographical landscape that Sarah lives within makes it harder to seek work, but also exacerbates her feelings of loneliness.

Geography therefore matters to loneliness, and here it can be seen to not only reinforce this vicious cycle Sarah feels stuck within, but it has also disrupted her biography. The uneven labour market, the ubiquity of precarious and temporary job contracts, and the reinforcement of neoliberal values that a job equates to an identity and sense of purpose, are all fuelling the way Sarah experiences and encounters her everyday life. These structural inequalities, neoliberal norms, values, and governmental decisions made on the macro scale and therefore influencing the daily lives, biographies and geographies of loneliness for people like Sarah.

4.1.3. (Un)supportive spaces and feeling (un)cared for

Feeling uncared for was something shared by several participants in the research. This was articulated as feeling “like a number” or through stories of exasperation of “hitting a brick wall” when attempting to move forward. This destination that participants felt unable to reach ranged from secure employment to appropriate healthcare and support. Care is inextricably linked to these stories of being paused, stuck, in a perpetual state of waiting. These moments reveal where care is lacking, but also how forms of care and support can flourish in these gaps. This section will explore how care – or a lack of it – feeds into the everyday experiences of biographical disruption, and how being held in a waiting time-space can influence feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Megan told me that while she was waiting for more intense mental health support, she had forced herself to attend a bi-weekly craft club which supports women’s mental health. While she did not really talk to the others in the group, she found going along helpful as the physical act of doing crafts helped take her mind off things. This echoes research by Collins (2018), who found that the act of making something in a shared space produces a sense of solidarity and trust enhancing individual wellbeing. Even if there is little in the way of conversation amongst the group, making is connecting (Gauntlett, 2011). The Men’s Shed movement, that seeks to tackle loneliness and isolation in older men by providing a space for practical tasks and crafts, is a further example of this (Cordier and Wilson, 2013). Like Megan’s craft group, it can act as a vital stage before professional or medical healthcare and support. This also links to governmental measures to promote social prescribing, which

allows health professionals to connect individuals with non-medical facilities in the community to enhance wellbeing (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2016).

Megan did, however, share that there were times when she could not concentrate because she was having a “bad day”, and she spent these days isolated at home unable to do anything. The presence of volunteer-run groups like the craft club, along with other charity and community groups, have become more commonplace following cuts to welfare funding. While they can act as an important and valuable part of the week, they do not compensate for the appropriate mental health care and support that Megan requires. I argue, however, that there needs to be space to hold both sources of support and care together. Cloke et al. (2020) draw on the idea that these “meantime spaces” (such as the craft group) offer a source of hope in “mean times” that austerity and structural inequalities promote. Rather than seeing them as a ‘sticking plaster’ for structural issues (the macro scale), these “here-and-now” spaces could be instead seen as hopeful and have the capacity to invite possibilities for alternative political ethics. These spaces can also act as a quieter resistance and form of radical politics (Askins, 2004; Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Jupp, 2017; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2018), with these classes often taking place behind the scenes, in mundane spaces (like the village hall) and often heavily reliant on volunteers. Therefore, while not substitute for healthcare, these spaces often provide a vital lifeline. This is highlighted further by the sustained support Megan received from another community organisation, PACT House in Stanley.

PACT House, which stands for ‘*Police and Community Together*’, is a community organisation that provides practical and emotional support to the Stanley area. Volunteers cook and serve meals each week to anyone who comes along. They have a youth club and help feed families during school holidays where they are struggling. PACT House also has a crisis foodbank and helps distribute emergency clothing and household items (County Durham Community Foundation). Megan tells me that they help a lot with universal credit applications, including her own, and often accompany people to DWP⁷ medical assessments, acting as vital sources of support and advocacy. With the help and advice of a work coach at PACT House, who told her “put this, this and this and hopefully they’ll [DWP] leave you alone”, she was able to fill

⁷ Department for Work and Pensions.

out an application form to change her welfare benefit from Employment Support Allowance (ESA) to PIP.

This quiet act of the advisor in one of these mundane, meantime spaces will potentially have a fundamental impact on Megan's life. Receiving PIP would give Megan *breathing space* to ensure she receives regular welfare payments but does not have the same demands on her time and energy to apply for a requisite number of jobs that receiving ESA demands. It would also, crucially, mean that she was in receipt of the appropriate benefits for her poor mental and physical health (exacerbated by cuts to health services and Megan remaining on waiting lists to gain the appropriate care and support). While this was additional emotional labour in terms of going through yet another bureaucratic process and period of waiting, she expressed her relief that the application to switch benefits has meant that "now they've left iz alone".

These spaces of support are, however, patchy and depend on pockets of funding across the county, leaving some people without any form of support at all. Megan could be seen as one of the 'lucky' ones. There were others who I spoke to that had either been able to go along to these supportive spaces, only for funding to be lost, or were unable to access anything at all. This was the case for James, whose story was presented above. His friends, family and partner all worked, and he was keen to meet new people. He attended various different classes and support groups, but each time he had attended these, they lasted only a few weeks before funding was lost. He was unable to keep meeting the other people who attended these groups after funding ran out because there was nowhere that they could meet for free, nor was it affordable in terms of public transport costs, food and drink if they were to meet in a café or restaurant. The use of these spaces as a way to *keep going* until access to the appropriate healthcare has been gained (in the case of Megan) therefore hinges on the continuation of these spaces being funded. If funding is lost, individuals like James or Megan are *back to where they started*, and the cycle continues.

Megan's previous job was one she had had since school. Her mam, grandma and family friends had all worked there too, and it was close to where she lived. It therefore played a dominant role in terms of her everyday life, as well as personal and family history, and she told me that it was hard for her to be away from there. The company had, however, changed ownership while she was there, and she reflected that she was "treated like a number" and

was “pushed” out of the business. As a result of this, as well as her poor health, Megan had left her job a year ago. This sense of being let down and uncared for has continued as she has dealt with the DWP and attempts to navigate the benefits system. While the DWP advisor had been very supportive, the nurse doing her PIP assessment “wasn’t so much” and she showed exasperation about what the result was going to be.

Megan’s experience is punctuated with positive stories of people attempting to help and support her and showing genuine care. The community workers at PACT House, the organisers of the craft club, her immediate family, and the helpful DWP benefits advisor that she described as incredibly supportive. These expressions of care came from those on the everyday, community scale. However, those who organise and provide the fundamentals (healthcare, financial security) of her everyday life – those on the macro scale – had left Megan feeling significantly uncared for.

This lack of care because of governmental, structural decisions and actions has disrupted Megan, in that access to appropriate healthcare, financial security, stability and peace of mind is *blocked, paused, suspended*. Megan tells me that she sees her feelings of loneliness as completely linked to her mental health, and that whenever she is having a “bad day”, she feels incredibly lonely. The inability to access healthcare to address her mental and physical health concerns puts a *block* on other aspects of her life – she is unable to work, she finds it difficult to leave the house, she finds it difficult to trust people enough to build relationships. The difficulty and emotional labour involved with applying for PIP also protracts this pause – another thing unresolved and awaiting a decision.

This feeling of being treated “as a number” was also shared by Sarah, who also had trouble accessing mental health care and support:

“They have every intention to not work with me. I have been discharged after six months. I have been living with these problems for as far back as I can remember. Eating disorder, not eating, not sleeping, sleep deprivation, post-traumatic stress, just constant erm...they discharged me after around six months...said I was fine – and then I ended up six stone 2 and deteriorated quite fast – again. Erm and then I did another self-referral and they tried to dismiss me again after three months and said everything was fine. I fought tooth and nail, tooth and nail, to get [social] workers, who have not seen me in the last four months. I don’t...I didn’t even have an allocated worker. It’s actually taken me...I was meant to have an appointment with this woman, I was meant to have an appointment with

her this week. There is somebody who comes out whose like a community support worker. So there is places like that, but without them helping, and actually being involved, then there's nothing. There's nothing because they're not putting in their side of the work. They're more interested in how many people they can discharge from their services, I think, that's how it feels. I am a number. I am a number and they are not interested in helping me, at all..."

Here Sarah refers to the fact she is seen as a "number," and that all "they" [service providers] are interested in is discharging patients and, in a sense, *get through* as many people on their waiting lists as possible. Sarah has therefore lost all trust and hope in receiving the appropriate care. She later tells me that if something is not done soon that she will discharge herself because no one is helping her anyway:

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

Sarah's constant "battling" to get the appropriate health care has clearly led to her feeling drained and detached, and that she may as well "give up" as she is not "getting anywhere" anyway. By discharging herself she is almost getting a resolution in that she is no longer waiting on the decisions and actions of other people. Even though discharging herself would mean she would not receive the support she needs and wants – it is this period of waiting that she finds so frustrating. Rather than being *suspended*, she will be able to *move forward* in some way (even if it was not in the way she originally hoped for, indeed, deserves).

The only way Sarah can gain some sense of ownership and end this frustrating pause is to remove herself from the vicious cycle she is in – which is to sacrifice gaining suitable care and support. This is not only unjust, but also has the potential to further entrench the issues that Sarah faces. Her mental health, she tells me, has made it difficult for her to build relationships with others. Moreover, the lack of support for her health also speaks to another kind of isolation. As Noreena Hertz (2020) notes, feeling unheard, uncared for and ignored by the government and wider institutions can lead to people feeling lonely and disconnected (and not just through a lack of interpersonal ties). Sarah's frustration at not receiving support, and her consequent threats to discharge (and detach) herself, shows how alienated she feels. The vicious cycle she finds herself within is reinforced by governmental decisions

and structures (here, for example, uneven cuts to mental health services) and the lack of support she receives has made her feel as though she is “a number” and that she is uncared for. This speaks to the imbalance of power and captures how Sarah’s lack of power has resulted in a period of stuckedness (Hage, 2009).

Amongst these (un)supportive spaces and feeling (un)cared for, there is also an interesting tension between attention and neglect. For Megan, while she felt overwhelmed by the constant presence of the DWP regarding her providing ‘proof’ that she should be in receipt of her payments, there was also a distinct lack of care, attention and support provided in terms of her need for physical and mental healthcare. This highlights the ways that time, in this sense waiting or proving productivity, is used by those in power to govern the everyday lives of people like Megan. It also points to how Megan’s biography has been disrupted, in that she is caught in a vicious cycle of requiring additional and appropriate healthcare for her to be able to work – not least for her personal wellbeing – but is also having to spend time applying for additional welfare support to gain extra time and space to focus on these things. The very fact that the government who require that she takes these steps are the same one who are cutting funding and exacerbating the strain put on healthcare services, exemplifies this sense of cyclical stuckedness that Megan finds herself in – revealing how decisions made on a governmental, structural scale, filter down to impact on Megan’s everyday life and ability to move on from the position she feels unable to break away from. Her loneliness is harder to break away from because she is stuck in this cycle that is perpetuated and fostered by structural decisions and policies.

4.1.4. Conclusion

This section, on power and time, addresses how structural barriers associated with the spatial-temporal positioning of my participants can connect to loneliness. I have done this by drawing on the life stories of four participants from group 1, whose narratives draw on structural barriers and loneliness. I have explored this here in the context of disrupted biographies. The time element in this section addresses biographical time, and when – if at all – specific milestones are reached. It also acknowledges the temporal patterns of the everyday. When these temporalities are felt to be out-of-sync, there is a sense of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006). Further, there is a temporality to how these disruptions are *felt*. Feeling like one has hit a dead end, or in a vicious cycle, suggests a *pause* or *repetitiveness* to the participants’ everyday rhythms and biographical timeline. I argue that

this connects to incidence of loneliness. In addition to this, I argue that geography matters to loneliness. While I am not suggesting there is a determinism to living in County Durham, I do suggest that the uneven landscape of the county lends itself to an environment where biographies are disrupted, and loneliness emerges. As I stated in Chapter 2, I have applied a relational approach to my conceptual framework to manage the tension between structure and agency. Therefore, in taking a relational approach to how participants relate to the self, others, and the state, I have been able to observe the lived experience of loneliness, and how this speaks to the macro level more broadly. Here, I see this in relation to the structural barriers that I contextualised in my introduction to County Durham in Chapter 1. Next, I continue this argument that loneliness is connected to disrupted biographies, turning my attention to the macro level in terms of neoliberal, social and relationship norms.

4.2. The social and cultural value of time

This section also explores disrupted biographies. The focus here is on norms and expectations around young adulthood and biographical life stages. I explore this in two ways. Firstly, I examine how these so-called milestones are stunted because of the spatial-temporal disadvantages afforded to County Durham millennials. Secondly, I highlight the emotional impact of this, with participants feeling *left behind* and *out-of-sync*. I argue this deepens feelings of disorientation and, ultimately, loneliness.

Further, I have found that the milestones that participants felt unable or difficult to *reach* are either financial and economic (home ownership; a professional or 'successful' career; financial security) or emotional and relational (marriage or long-term partner; children; a large group of friends). While the difficulty in reaching economic and financial goals certainly has an emotional element, with participants feeling weary, disenfranchised and frustrated, those finding it hard to build relationships and hit familial and relational milestones express feelings of shame and embarrassment. There was a sense that not hitting these heteronormative milestones and expectations was more painful to express, than the financial and economic milestones which almost seemed inevitable in the current landscape. While this may seem obvious, especially for a project exploring feelings of loneliness, it is important to acknowledge how wider expectations and relational narratives on the macro scale, can infiltrate the everyday lives and play a key role in millennial loneliness.

I introduce 7 more participants in this section. They have all been selected from either group 1 (structural barriers and loneliness), 2 (neoliberal adulthood and loneliness) or 3 (cultural isolation and loneliness). Each of these participant clusters speak to overarching norms that filter down and affect the experience of loneliness on the personal level.

This section will be split into three parts. First, there will be an engagement with the stories of participants who have found being unable to reach adult milestones such as home ownership and financial independence to be a real assault on their sense of worth. This will be set within the context of being a millennial in County Durham, and how their spatial-temporal positioning has meant that these milestones are even harder to meet. This section will therefore engage with how the uneven landscape of the labour market and disinvestment from central government, means that those young adults living in County Durham may have an increased likelihood of finding it difficult to secure economic and financial 'success'. I argue that loneliness can emerge from these feelings.

Secondly, drawing on the emotional and relational milestones, testimonies from participants will be explored in terms of how feeling *out-of-sync* in the context of heteronormative expectations can be difficult to deal with. Thirdly, these overarching norms will be critiqued, as I draw on the ways that biographical time – what someone is doing and when – can be loaded with expectations and pressures. In turn, low self-esteem and low self-worth can emerge, and be part of the experience of loneliness. I address these ideas by engaging with the life stories of Holly and Ashleigh. They each pride themselves in *going against the grain* in terms of the way they live their lives. Their stories are interesting as they not only show awareness of pervasive narratives and expectations of adulthood, but also demonstrate the highs and lows of *pushing back* against social norms and expectations. They feel pride some days, only to feel deflated, different, drained and isolated on others. This section will therefore explore the emotional work that is involved in being different, and how long loneliness can emerge from these spaces of otherness and disorientation.

4.2.1. Inevitable disruptions: County Durham millennials and economic/financial 'milestones'

As outlined in Chapter 1, the socio-economic geography of County Durham can make securing a job, buying a home, and being financially secure more difficult to access. This is especially true for a generation that has entered adulthood in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and over a decade of austerity. This context sits in the background of all the

stories shared in this research, affecting some more than others. Here I consider the temporality and spatiality of affective atmospheres (Hitchen, 2021) and what this means for loneliness. The concept of affective atmospheres also helps to avoid a deterministic portrayal of the participants in this study. By using an affective atmosphere of loneliness to unpick these experiences, it helps open the varying lived experiences of millennial loneliness in County Durham. It also embraces the project's spatial-temporal context and helps give a relational understanding to how this context influences the everyday lives of millennials in nuanced ways.

Two things were found in relation to those participants who found it difficult to 'achieve' economic and financial milestones. Firstly, this weighed heavily on their self-esteem and their sense of worth. This was explored in earlier sections of this chapter but will be reiterated here to highlight how the spatial-temporal context of millennials in County Durham can show how economic and financial insecurity is emotional. Not only in terms of the worry that insecurity brings, but also how this made the participants feel about themselves. Secondly, I noted that there was also a sense of *inevitability* to these feelings, in that given their awareness of where they lived and the economic climate, they saw it as expected.

I first turn to Abbie, who is positioned in Group 2. Her life story and narrative of loneliness spoke strongly to the neoliberal norms of adulthood, and how this made her feel *less than*.

Abbie is 28 years old and lives in Seaham, County Durham. She is married and looks after her two young children full time. She has had a series of part-time and full-time jobs since she left sixth form in 2009 but decided not to return to her retail job after the birth of her second child in 2017. Despite being fairly secure financially, with her husband recently setting up his own business, she tells me that she often compares herself to her friends and family, feeling as though she is "nothing" compared to those who work. While this speaks to debates around the gendered division of labour, the lack of respect and value placed on reproductive labour and, again, wider narratives around what is deemed 'successful' as a young adult, it is worth highlighting the ways that not 'working' (in a salaried sense) plays on her mind and affects her self-esteem.

Sarah, who was introduced earlier in the chapter, also states that not working impacts on her sense of self and wellbeing. Like Abbie, she referred to this idea of *nothingness*, stating that she does not feel as valuable as her partner in her relationship: "I don't feel like I can

contribute as much as he does in the relationship. You know, like he has something to share with me but I've got nothing really to talk to him about." For both Abbie and Sarah, the lack of working leaves them feeling somehow incomplete or *lacking* in some way.

The concept of chronormativity (Wanka, 2010) can help interpret this. Chronormativity is the idea that social practices – what someone does, when, who with, and how – are assumed to be achieved at specific temporal moments across an individual's lifecourse. These chronormative practices are reinforced by being repeatedly performed, thus creating a social norm. This can take place at multiple sites and scales, and here I consider it from the macro scale. Particularly in terms of the economic, political structures that not only reinforce the expectation to work and be financially independent from the state but have also placed County Durham millennials in an uneven landscape of opportunity and stability. Therefore, for Abbie and Sarah – as well as others in the research – the feeling of being on the outside of what is considered the norm is disorientating and feeds into a sense of low self-worth.

I build on Sharma's (2014) argument that Massey's concept of power geometries also has a temporal element too. Time both in the sense of how one spends it, as well as how events are temporally achieved and experienced across the lifecourse, can depend on, and be manipulated by, powerful structures. This helps explain both the low self-esteem and self-worth that is associated with falling outside of these temporal norms, but also the unevenness of how time is experienced (Olsen 2015). Further, applying the concept of affective atmosphere (Hitchen, 2021) helps unravel how the spatialities and temporalities of County Durham millennials can allow differential realities to emerge. For these participants, here, there was a sense of feeling *worn down*, and an *inevitability* of circumstances due to where they lived.

"Erm so I could probably work as something but my options are limited. I couldn't work in a shop because I couldn't see what was on the shelves. Or I couldn't see the money that the customer was giving me. That sort of thing. Same with working in an office. I can't use a computer for that long. Erm. So round here it's either office work, pub work, or industry. None of which I can do." – James

"I can't get like a normal job because I've done erm work experience before but it was pretty difficult. I did work experience at Asda and the second time I did it was at Pets at Home. Both of them were sort of retail and erm...it was pretty difficult. Especially with heavy lifting erm and standing up for too long...so it was....I certainly struggle with some...with certainly

the physical aspects of retail. Something I know I probably shouldn't get into. Erm...and obviously my problems with not really being able to talk to a lot of people that er sort of rules out some other things. So it's limited in what I could do as a job" – Adam

While for James and Adam there were specific, personal reasons that accessing work in the region was made harder, this hopelessness directed at the situation was shared amongst others in the research. There was a frequent *heaviness* noted in many of the interviews. I next turn to Hannah's story. Following analysis, Hannah was placed in group 2, as her story spoke to the disorientation she felt in relation to neoliberal adulthood norms.

Hannah is 23 and lives in Gilesgate. She is an MA student who works part-time, and her interview largely centred on the lack of opportunities for young adults in the area. In particular, she spoke of the cycle that she and her friends found themselves in - go to work, pay bills, and then be "skint" until payday. Hannah was also the only one on her course who had to work alongside study, which meant she was spread thinly across her various responsibilities and felt drained. She was also acutely aware of the circumstances and disadvantages that came with living and working in County Durham as a young person:

"I feel really strongly about there not being enough money being put into young people at the minute erm to help young people at all. Erm so...but we've got all the shit. You know what I mean? So like 30 years ago I'd probably have a house by now and I'd have paid off me uni because it would have been like a grand. But...we're like the 'lazy ones' and we're just going out and wasting all our money and we're expecting to be handed things on a plate...and it's a bit like...no wonder we're starting to not like older generations. Like they got us into this mess and we're living it...but they're blaming us for it. So....I think like 30 years ago young people probably could relate to older generations – but I don't think they can now. I think they resent them a little bit." – Hannah

"but then my friends and that who don't have anything wrong with them – they still just feel lonely because they're just stuck in a cycle. But it's a cycle of they'll be at work making hardly any money to pay bills...but then there's not enough funding going into health services...so they get depressed and they don't want to go out. So they stop working but they can't afford to live...so it's just like this horrible cycle." – Hannah

Hannah then went on to tell me that she understood loneliness as being a "lack of everything." She was both astute and despondent when talking about the circumstances and prospects of her and her peers. While Hannah studied and worked, as did her friends, she noted that they were all financially precarious and unable to plan or imagine their futures.

They were therefore suspended in a space of being unable to *move forward* or *towards* goals that Hannah saw as coming so easily to previous generations.

Their biographies felt disrupted or, indeed, paused. While Hannah spoke in broad terms about the issues that her generation faced, she emphasised the struggles in the local area. She drew on how there was only a limited range of jobs she felt were easily available to her – concentrated in retail or customer service – and not in the creative arts that she wished to pursue. These comments were shared by others in the study. While many of the respondents worked, there was certainly a sense that they felt held back by the constraints and lack of opportunities in the area that they lived.

What is being considered here, and what this research advances on, is the idea that power and time coincide and have an unsettling and disruptive impact on the biographies of the people in this study. This contributes to feelings of loneliness. Further, I argue that there is an emotional impact on participants. A *hopelessness* and a *wearing down*. I see this as being a result of disorientation from not *fitting in*, but also because they cannot see a way to *progress*. Some draw on feeling trapped by their own spatial-temporal circumstances.

Of course, this is not to suggest that this set of conditions is deterministic, as this is clearly not the case for all millennials in County Durham (or, indeed, all participants mentioned in this chapter). However, these participants, in this place, in this period of their lives, experience a lack of economic and financial stability that feels inevitable. It weighs heavily on them – they feel *disrupted*, *unsettled*, and *lonely*.

4.2.2. *Out-of-sync: disruptions to emotional and relational ‘milestones’*

This section draws on the discomfort felt when personal relationships fall outside the expectations of neoliberal adulthood and heteronormative society. While this will be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6 as recurring themes of how relationships are understood, navigated, and encountered, this section will open the conversation around how powerful the emotions are when one feels disorientated. The inevitability of not hitting economic and financial milestones had an emotional element that connected to low self-worth, but there was something *more* to it when discussing the emotional, relational ‘milestones’ in their biographies.

In the interviews, my questions around these topics were often met with long pauses, obvious discomfort, awkwardness, a sense of embarrassment, caveats, and comments about not being odd, unfriendly, or unsociable. This was particularly found to be in the case when doing the personal community mapping exercise. Every single interviewee completed this task, and each person told me “it doesn’t look a lot” or “you must think I’m really sad” or a “loser” – all participants made some form of self-deprecating comment as if they were pre-empting judgement from me. In fact, the personal community maps were extremely varied. Some showed a community full of friends, colleagues, family members, partners, children, pets, and neighbours, showing deeply embedded personal communities and support systems. While some participants had fewer people ‘plotted’ on their map, most had more than a handful of people they could talk about. This may seem obvious considering this research project draws on the topic of loneliness, a term often loaded with shame and stigma. In many ways it is unsurprising that the participants would therefore express at least some form of discomfort when talking about these parts of their personal lives and relationships. However, the very emotional response, centring on shame or embarrassment, and fear of judgement, speaks to wider norms and narratives about how relationships are seen in society.

As outlined in Chapter 2, transitions to adulthood are often considered “arrested” (Côte, 2000), with young people taking longer to reach milestones which were traditionally associated with adulthood. In this research, it is interesting to note quite different emotional responses to the various facets of adulthood. The relational and emotional milestones appeared to weigh more heavily, and there was shame expressed by participants who saw their friendships and relationships falling outside of the norm. This topic will be explored in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6, but it felt important to draw on it here in Chapter 4, to show how the powerful norms and expectations can leave people feeling out-of-sync, disorientated, and lonely.

This idea of being out-of-sync, connects to how the participants believed they should be positioned on the lifecourse due to their age. They felt out-of-sync because there was a mismatch between their actual age and what adulthood is socially and normatively understood to be. Andy is 35 and lives just outside of Durham City centre. He has three children and is recently divorced. He reflected on how his loneliness was connected to being

newly divorced and felt the absence of a romantic partner. He also shared that most of his friends tended to prioritise their family lives over connecting with friends:

“...and they want to gravitate towards their family and if they’re not seeing their wives, their partners and their kids – they’re seeing their mam and dad, or their close relatives. So it’s like friends tend to come last – and that is, that is life. Erm and I was the same erm...so it is hard. So if I want to plan something I’ve got to try and plan it in advance for a weekend...so if I want to go on a night out or whatever – it’s like so I’m off now, say all the weekends, I’m off in three weeks – and then the weekends start up again. So I’ve got to try and see people then. But then I can’t see everyone either so it’s like who do you see? If I can’t see certain ones and then it’s like oh well I haven’t seen him for months now so why should I....? and that’s how life goes sometimes. So it’s quite hard to try and juggle it around. I’ve got plenty of free time for myself...but it’s just fitting it in with other people that’s hard. And it’s hard – at my age – it’s like where do I? how do you make friends? You normally make friends at school and work friends...but it’s...if you don’t have any of them how do you? How do you start up making friends again?” – Andy

Andy is going through the transition of a divorce, which has been cited as a risk factor for loneliness (Campaign to End Loneliness). As well as grieving his relationship ending, Andy feels out-of-sync with his peers. He reflects on the lack of a support system or anyone to really spend time with. He draws on how his friends prioritize their own families, which he reflects is what he used to do as well. His position on the lifecourse seems *other* to that of his personal community. Further, he worries how he can make more friends at this point, as his life has been thrown into a different direction to what he expected:

“I’ve got a feeling of loneliness now that I’ve never...I’ve never felt this way before....I’ve never felt this down. I’ve never felt...by myself. At first I felt like I’ve got no friends, I’ve got no one to talk to, I’ve got nowhere to go, I’ve got...who do you go to? I mean there’s no one there to be like ‘aw hi I’m lonely come and speak to me’ sort of thing...and it’s embarrassing as well...like to do that, you know? Maybes if you were like...I mean I would have associated this kind of feeling with being older...like when you’ve been with your wife and your wife dies, or you lose someone or in that way...and then you’d feel this way. Whereas when it happened at my age I’m like...I don’t know what to do for the best...I just go with my gut feeling and go along and see how it goes. It’s all I can do, like....” – Andy

Andy expresses how the way he feels is “embarrassing” which prevents him being available to those around him. He described this as a combination of feeling lonely, which he previously understood as something only older people went through, and his everyday life, schedule, and family structure being different to that of his friends.

There was also a gendered element to how he saw his personal community shrinking. He told me that when he got married to his wife, he moved to County Durham (from Sunderland), and became more heavily embedded in her existing friendships and family life.

“But women want to be with their family. And I think that’s what you do...you find somebody, you meet someone, build a family, get a home and it gravitates...women just gravitate towards their mam and dad and then men towards the women and their family”.

As a result of his divorce, he therefore became isolated from his wife’s friends and family. This, combined with finding it difficult to talk about his feelings, and feeling out-of-sync with how his family and domestic life was structured, exacerbated and deepened his feelings of loneliness. This led to him to a “dark place” where he felt “lost.” His reflections have a spatial element to them, and Ahmed’s (2006) language of disorientation is again useful here. This disconnect between how he imagined his life to be and how it is, is disorientating and lonely.

This speaks to conversations around masculinity and mental health, which was drawn on heavily by another participant, Liam. Liam is a 24-year-old student nurse from Newton Aycliffe. He had also recently ended his relationship with his partner and found himself with a limited support network. Like Andy, Liam reflected on his circumstances as if he were watching everyone else “progress” with relationships in a normative, expected way. This made him feel othered and out-of-sync. The way he spoke about relationships was also revealing, as he reflected on his feelings while scrolling social media and seeing couples – referring to this as “people achieving stuff.” This not only connects to literature relating social media to loneliness (Pittman and Reich, 2016; Slade, 2012; Turkle, 2011), but also suggests that he sees himself as a failure. He tells me this makes him feel depressed and lonely. To consider being in a relationship as an achievement links with ideas around adulthood being reached after a series of milestones have been met.

Liam also drew on feelings of being “left behind,” explaining that all his friends left Newton Aycliffe for university, whereas he stayed in his hometown to work, now attending a local university a few years later. This will be something explored in Chapter 5, as he reflects strongly on how he sees himself and his identity being tied to the norms of the local area. Here, however, I will draw on his experiences in the context of what this has meant for his friendships. His personal community shrank when his school friends left for university, and he compares himself to his brother:

“I find it hard anyway sometimes...and it’s like, once you get out of the friendship circle and everyone goes their separate ways type of thing, and moves away, it’s quite difficult to join another one I think. So I’ll give you an example. Like my brother – he’s 37 nearly – and he’s been friends with the same group of lads since he was 18? Well nah, younger, 16? They’ve been friends ever since, you know what I mean? Erm, and they’re all dead close and there’s about 8 or 9 of them and they’ve been close forever. Whereas...like...I haven’t had that, you know?” – Liam

Liam refers in his interview to a specific culture of the local area that privileges having a large group of “lad mates”. This is an important part of being a young man in his hometown. Not having this masculine adult identity contributes to Liam’s feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Further, Liam was acutely aware of how this linked with his mental health, and the struggles he had faced in terms of speaking about his emotions, but also in not having a large group of “lad mates”. Liam’s loneliness was more than not having this large group of friends, it was the perception (real or imagined) that he was different, whilst also facing stereotypes about men and mental health. The powerful role of gendered expectations linked to temporal expectations of how the emotional and relational aspects of adulthood should be lived. These expectations were also spatial, as he felt he did not fit into the local area.

This link between gender, expected relationships and loneliness was also found in the life stories from some of the women in the research. Lily is 29 and lives in Sacriston. She was on maternity leave at the time of the interview but works as a teaching assistant in a school. Lily articulated a strong narrative of how she had never been friends with girls when growing up, and that she still struggles with friendships with other women – preferring the company of men. She also frequently referred to herself as a “loner,” and was comfortable with that – and mostly rejected the idea that she was lonely, despite taking part in the research. For most of the interview, she told me she was not bothered, or interested, in building new friendships, and she was content with socializing with her husband and his friends. However, she then went on to tell me that it was one of her “life regrets” that she had not focused more on female friendships. There were therefore contradictions in her claims to be happy to be a “loner,” not enjoying the company of other women, and disinterested in building new connections, because she then shared that she regretted not having these friendships.

The idea of “regret” has a temporal element and therefore connects with this chapter’s focus on power and time. To regret suggests that it is *too late* for Lily to build new connections, as well as having an element of placing her on *pause* in the present – that she is stuck and must

continue in her current state. These competing emotions link to Lily's comments about how her lack of female friendships had been frequently critiqued by her mum, as well as at school:

"I think, as a young woman....you're expect to have loads of female friends – and if you don't fit into that and if you prefer males, it's either well 'you're a lesbian' or....like you should...like my mum always said to me 'aw you should play with the girls' and even as a little kid my mum was always saying 'you should play with the girls, you should play with the girls...you know, you shouldn't always be with the boys because when they get older they won't want to play with you' – like that sort of attitude – erm yeah I feel like that's...like teachers as well...teachers were always like 'aw play with the girls' and it's very much like when you're little, you should stick with your own gender...I think that's an expectation to be...wanting loads of female friends and sharing secrets...no...I don't think I fit into the stereotypical young adult female role. At all." – Lily

In referencing this "stereotype," Lily acknowledges wider expectations around what kind of friendships and relationships that she, as a young woman, should have, and how this has defined her life so far. In not having the 'right' kind of friendships, Lily is made to feel odd, and is as if she is somehow living her life incorrectly. These expectations, expressed to her by her mum and teachers, as well as wider images of what female friendship should stereotypically look like, places her in tension with what she wants and what she is expected to want – and thus feeds into this sense of regret. Not only is there something here about the lack of normative friendships in young womanhood, but also the suggestion that her feminine identity is at stake, with her feeling othered for not fitting the "stereotype." These were feelings shared by Louise, who, in her interview, expressed unease and embarrassment at not having a large "girl gang" to spend her free time with, like others she knew and had seen on social media.

The participant stories that have been drawn on in this section demonstrate just some of the experiences of millennials in this study who feel out-of-sync with their peers. This temporal mismatch between their own lives and the expected, normative lives and relationships of young adults, has an infantilising and othering effect – they are not fully adult, or they are "odd" for not wanting or having these expected relationships. The participants expressed these feelings in temporal terms, in that they had not achieved certain relationships by certain points in their lifecourse. This resonates with the youth transitions literature highlighted in Chapter 2.

Further than this, there was a spatial element found here too. This was reflected in the types of relationships that were expected “round here,” and what young adulthood looked like overall. This advances on the youth transitions literature, as well as literature on the geographies of loneliness, as it explores the intersection between imaginations of adulthood, the expectations of relationships, and the experience of loneliness.

4.2.3. The highs and lows of difference: the emotional work and loneliness of being and feeling ‘other’

The two previous sections have explored how chronormativity (Freeman, 2010; Wanka, 2020) can result in participants feeling out-of-sync or lacking if they do not meet these socially and culturally specific milestones. This section considers the life stories of two participants who embrace this difference, and actively acknowledge that they are writing their own biography in retaliation to the pervasiveness of these norms and expectations. Drawing on the life stories from Holly and Ashleigh, this section serves as a counterpoint to these norms, highlighting the *highs* of feeling different to those around them. It also acknowledges that embracing a life that is considered different can be emotionally wearing, disorientating, and, punctured with loneliness.

Holly is 36 years old and is a teacher, living in Consett, County Durham. She grew up in Gateshead, went to Durham University, and moved to Consett for her first teaching job after graduating. She bought her first home here when she started her first job, and lives there now. She has, however, travelled and taught across Europe in between her first job and her current role back in Consett. She lives alone but sees her partner regularly. She has several close friends, but they are not all part of the same friendship group, and she can go weeks without seeing some of them. She was very close to her mam, who recently passed away, and does not have much of a relationship with her dad, siblings, and step-family. Holly’s life story and narrative of loneliness centred on being and feeling ‘different.’

When I first approached Holly about this research, she said she was really interested in contributing to the project because she felt that as a woman, there was a particular pressure to conform to “normality,” and that she had lived alone for the last 7 years and was “fiercely independent”. Straight away I could see that her narrative of loneliness was likely to centre on expectations of adulthood, as well as gendered expectations, and I looked forward to interviewing her as I had not yet interviewed someone who had so clearly acknowledged the

why when it came to feeling lonely, nor had I encountered a participant who drew so clearly on the pressures felt to conform as a young adult. Further, I was intrigued to hear more about how her “fierce independence” would coincide with her feelings of loneliness. This presented an interesting dynamic between how loneliness is perceived, and the interplay between (in)dependence and interdependency that emerges from individualised discourses of adulthood (Duncan and Smith, 2006; Evans, 2008; Holdsworth, 2007; Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Valentine, 2003), as well as loneliness itself.

Wilkinson (2022) succinctly captures the ways that narratives around loneliness uphold normative and othering ideals, especially around family life, and romantic love. The way that loneliness is understood in mainstream narratives – both through the increasing attention in the media and the UK government’s recent strategies to “tackle loneliness” – is that those who live alone and not within a nuclear family are most likely to be “at risk” of loneliness. This upholds a normative and narrow understanding of who and how a life less lonely is lived. Wilkinson (2022) therefore draws on how these discourses surrounding loneliness, constructs single people who live alone, especially single women, as a “tragic loner”, which does little to combat the very structural reasons that can create conditions that heighten the likeliness of loneliness (Batsleer and Duggan, 2020; Stenning and Hall, 2018).

These narratives, norms and expectations around adulthood and loneliness, which are also gendered, reveal how pervasive ideals on the macro scale and can impact on the everyday life and emotions. While this section draws on the ways that being and feeling different can be felt in a multitude of ways and have an emotional impact, Holly and Ashleigh express this in terms of living alone, not being married, and not having children. Research has shown that being single, living alone, or not living within a ‘traditional’ family unit can be positive for mental health and mean being more involved in social and civic life (Klinenberg, 2012; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Home and heteronormative family life is also not always a source of happiness and security (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012). I elaborate on this in Chapter 6. Nevertheless, a pervasive “compulsory coupledness” is instilled in society that is not only socially valued but also economically rewarded by government policies (Wilkinson, 2013).

This helps contextualise the circumstances that millennials – and here Holly and Ashleigh – live within, with this section illustrating some of the *highs* and *lows* associated with this. As

previously stated, the feeling of difference that Holly reflected on was linked to several areas in her life, and she remarked that it was “a bit of a theme” as she told me her life story. She grew up on a council estate in Gateshead but attended a “good school” where the other students were from “posh areas.” As a result of this, she was seen as “too posh” to be friends with the local kids, but “too rough” to be included by her school peers. While at Durham University, she faced derogatory comments about her “working class accent” (i.e. a local accent) from middle class students. The irony here, of course, was that she was othered within a university that was local to her, but she did not fit in as the ‘norm’ for a student who often attended this university. She also drew on how she felt like the “odd one out” in her family, as she was significantly younger than her siblings, and felt a distance with them in terms of their interests and views.

The main reason she felt different, and the key narrative of her loneliness, was connected to the exclusion and othering she felt in her workplace. At work, Holly felt very lonely, and this was the first place she had worked where she had not found someone on her “level.” She spent every lunchtime alone and chose not to have lunch in the staff room because whenever she talked about something that she was interested in or enjoyed, it was met with silence and disapproval. She felt her reasoning for not fitting in was because she was not the “kind of person” or, specifically, the “type of woman,” that was the norm in the area. This was because she was not living with her partner, did not want to be married, and did not want children.

Until the time of the interview and the preceding months, Holly told me that she was comfortable within herself and her choice to live separately from her partner and not have children. While this confidence had not dissipated, and she was still resolute in how she lived her life, she drew on how feeling different in the eyes of her colleagues was beginning to exhaust her. These feelings were shared by Ashleigh.

Ashleigh is 28 years old and lives in Easington Village, County Durham. She is a social worker and is proud of her career, having been promoted and progressed quickly. She lives alone and owns her own home, which is close to where her parents live, but she tells me she only lives in Easington because the house prices are low. She therefore does not feel any connection to the area and notes that her friends all live in Sunderland. This means that she is always travelling either to work or to socialise. She is single and aware that her close friends are beginning to

get married and have children, whereas she wants to focus on her career. Ashleigh's life story and narrative of loneliness centred on the idea of being 'different' to people her own age, as well feeling like she did not 'fit in' with the norms and expectations of the area where she lived.

Like Holly, Ashleigh felt very aware that as she got older, she was following a "different path" to those in her personal community. While she did not feel pressure from her friends and family to orientate herself towards this path of heteronormative milestones, she noted that she felt that the values and attitudes of where she lived carried the weight of disapproval and confusion at the path she was taking:

"And I think especially where we live as well, I think it's like, it's sort of a generation thing, it's the mindset of quite a lot of people and we live in quite a small area, and people are pretty much like, they've worked, they've got married, they've had children. And, like, sometimes it's 'you're out of the box' effect ... I think if I was to bump into someone random from around here and talk to them, I think they'd ask 'are you with someone? Have you got children? Are you married?' that's just the first thing they'd say to you. Nobody says, like, are you ok? What's your job?. They always say are you married? Do you have children? And it's, like, why are they the first questions you'd ask somebody?"

Ashleigh's reference to being "out of the box" suggests a sense of exclusion, where she can see a clear difference between herself and those she encounters in everyday life. As she shared her life story, it was clear that she felt pride and enjoyed working hard and being career focused. She was also explicit that she does not want the life she sees those her age leading (i.e. getting married, having children, living with partners). She did, however, express a kind of weariness and exasperation at the norm of strangers questioning her relationship status, as well as having to constantly contact friends to make plans as they usually prioritise their partners and families:

"I'm at an age now where a lot of me friends have children, a lot of me friends are settled down, and I'm obviously not. Like I'm not at that stage. So, like, sometimes I feel like, if I didn't text people, would they text me? Would I actually see somebody?"

Holly and Ashleigh's interview narratives reveal a confidence and sense of self-worth and pride at the way each has been able to carve out their own path through life. At the same time, achieving self-determination is arguably enervating and a source of mixed emotions.

These narratives expose weariness at continually negotiating conflicting views, priorities, and expectations.

For Holly, this was brought to the surface by her exclusion at work, where she felt as though she had no “allies.” The time intensive job of being a teacher meant that she spent most of her waking hours in the school, and in a place that she felt excluded, this meant that it was having a draining and isolating impact on her. The rest of the staff that worked with Holly had been there for many years, had entrenched relationships within the school, had established cliques, and were all local to the Consett area. While Holly had mentioned in our interview that there was a sense of community at the school, with the staff organising emergency housing and supplies for a local woman who had come from a women’s refuge, she noted that this sense of community was “based on insiders...which church you went to and with who” and that she did not have “family roots” in the area so it was “tricky” for her to be included.

As discussed above, this difference that Holly felt related to her not having any family ties in the area, and not following a way of life that her colleagues or, as she believed, the people in Consett thought she should – seen as “odd” for not living with her partner, wanting to get married, or wanting children. These feelings were shared by Ashleigh, and she told me that she had never previously felt lonely in her life, but she had started to go through “peaks and troughs,” where she found herself crying and being unsure of what “this feeling” was. It was only after speaking to her mam, as well as seeing my call for research participation, that she was able to name this feeling as loneliness. She attributed getting older and not following the usual “path” (and, like Holly, not desiring marriage and children) to these feelings rising to the surface now. She reflected that she had previously been a happy, sociable person who had never encountered feelings of loneliness. I would also argue that these conflicting feelings are likely to have been triggered by widespread notions of a ‘biological clock’ (Lahad, 2017).

4.2.4. Biographical disruptions within local cultural atmospheres

This idea of paths and pursuing a so-called different path, speaks to Sara Ahmed’s (2006) concept of (dis)orientation and “lines”, where some bodies are more easily accepted and orientated in space than others. These lines are the directions we take through life – the paths. Further, these lines, these paths, are defined by repetition. The more these directions

and paths are taken, the clearer the path. Taking this path therefore *aligns* you with those who have come before, and those who join you on the path in the present. As these paths and lines have been taken before, a future outcome is made tangible. The future can be imagined.

Both Holly and Ashleigh have drawn on how these feelings of difference have only recently emerged. For Ashleigh, this has surfaced as she has got older and seen herself taking a different path to her peers. For Holly, it was when she was exposed to a new working environment whereby she abruptly felt othered for her views and life choices. Interestingly, both Holly and Ashleigh see these differences, this disorientation, as being explained by the norms of the area they live within. While Ashleigh's former orientation seemed to 'expire' as she got older and saw those around her getting married and having children, she saw this 'expiration date' brought closer by the norms she saw as ubiquitous in the area. Holly's life choices and experiences had been expressed by Holly as something to be celebrated and defended, but her job and living in an area she described as "stuck in the past," meant that being disorientated was becoming emotionally draining and harder to navigate. I expand on these ideas of culture, norms and imagined geography in Chapter 5.

This idea of paths and (dis)orientation helps make sense of becoming aware of being different, but Ahmed's (2004) cultural and political reading of emotion can help interpret the clashing emotions and tension between Holly's "fierce independence" and Ashleigh's pride at working hard and refusal to conform, alongside their feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

Emotions provide the script. To deviate is to go against the norm, the nation⁸, the right way. It is to be othered: "you become the 'you' if you accept the invitation to align yourself with the nation, and against others who threaten to take the nation away" (Ahmed, 2004, p.12). Ashleigh and Holly are therefore not following the 'correct,' or what they see as the expected, script in their local area and amongst their personal communities. They feel different, they feel othered, they are disorientated. Further, this script could be understood as place-specific, or be part of the atmosphere⁹ that County Durham millennials 'should' follow the script within. An atmosphere can be the same for all who are *in it*, but a

⁸ The nation here is understood as the socio-cultural norms of an area. Ahmed (2004) is writing in the context of the UK as a nation.

⁹ This "atmosphere" differs to the "affective atmosphere" (Anderson, 2009; Hitchen, 2021) I have drawn on so far. Here, I am using Ahmed's (2004) language of emotion, atmosphere and attunement.

relationship to this atmosphere can be encountered differently depending on the subject. Those within this atmosphere, the area where emotional scripts are contained, may therefore feel comfortable or in “attunement,” or uncomfortable and othered.

I build on Ahmed’s (2004) conceptual ideas here. When considering this atmosphere that Holly and Ashleigh, as well as the other participants in this study, are encountering, it is important to state that these atmospheres can be on various scales: County Durham, the specific area they live, their workplace, their home. While this study attends to these varying scales, here I consider how the macro scale can create an affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Hitchen, 2021) that is disruptive. Austerity cuts, fewer opportunities, disinvestment in local government, neoliberal social and cultural norms, all feed into this macro scale and affective atmosphere. The spatiality and temporality of this affective atmosphere on the macro scale is encountered differently by the diverse lived experiences of County Durham millennials.

While Holly and Ashleigh have secure careers that they thrive in, this is clearly not the case for others in the County and, indeed, others within this study. Everyone has their own relationship to the atmosphere around them, based on their positionality and personal context. Holly and Ashleigh are *affected* by this macro level atmosphere in terms of the norms and expectations they see as ubiquitous in the areas they live.

As Ahmed (2004) states, being comfortable is not always consciously felt, and it is a privilege to feel at ease and to belong, with no effort, to one’s surroundings. An attempt to attune oneself, which is the attempt to *fit in*, “requires emotional labour” (Ahmed, 2004, p.224). Further, to stoically accept and embrace this feeling of disorientation and ‘un-attunement’, to push back against expectations and norms, can also be emotionally draining. There can be sense of shame and embarrassment if one does not go along with the script, and these feelings can be absorbed internally and directed at the self (Ahmed, 2004, p. 223). This weariness can be seen in both Ashleigh and Holly’s life stories. Holly finds the weight of this expectation and difference to be especially suffocating in her workplace. While she embraces and celebrates her feeling of difference in most other areas of her life until this point (the interview), when she spoke of her loneliness and othering at work she was clearly overwhelmed and she drew on how she had become increasingly “withdrawn.”

This question of who feels comfortable and who does not, links to the idea of whose bodies fit in and whose do not. This is a question of what social, political, and economic decisions have been made that allow some bodies to sink easily into space, while others are confronted with discomfort and exclusion. I argue that the spatial and temporal context of being a millennial in County Durham can affect this. Further, I suggest that the social and cultural understandings of time can be othering and wearing. While Holly and Ashleigh have previously expressed pride in their rejection of – what they see as – locally embedded norms, the constant *pushing back* and attempts to *attune* and *orientate* themselves has led to them feeling *disrupted, unsettled, and, lonely*.

4.2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the macro scale has disrupted biographies, and what this means for loneliness. I have done this in two ways. I began the chapter by engaging with ideas around power and time. This ‘power’ I related to was the structural actions and decisions made by central government, which have filtered down and affected the everyday lives of participants in this research. I argued that this context had a blocking, pausing and cyclical impact on the participants’ ability to move towards markers of adulthood. I noted that these markers were not only aspirational, neoliberal concepts, but were foundational to living in a healthy, secure, and comfortable way. These basics related to healthcare, secure housing, employment, and financial stability. These disruptions are thus engineered by the macro scale and, I suggest, link to incidence of loneliness.

Secondly, I have argued that the macro scale relates to social and cultural norms around adulthood. These norms have also had a disrupting impact on millennial biographies. I have found that there is a division in the emotional response to reaching – or not – the various milestones of adulthood. Financial and economic milestones are met with a sense of inevitability. Shame and stigma is attached to feeling out-of-sync with peers with regard to relational milestones. I also critique the pervasiveness of these norms, but highlight that pushing back against these expectations can be emotionally draining. In all of these instances I contend that disorientation can emerge from these biographical disruptions. As with section 4.1, I argue that loneliness emerges from these disruptions.

This chapter has used the language of Sara Ahmed’s theoretical work, particularly that of (dis)orientation. This has helped sharpen my arguments and make connections between the

macro level, biography, and loneliness. I continue this throughout my empirical chapters, as I see it as a valuable tool to understand the key concepts of this project: everyday life, emotion and relationships. The spatiality and temporality of affective atmospheres have also been applied here, and have helped give a non-deterministic conceptualisation of the relationship between place and lived experience. The feminist, phenomenological and relational conceptual framework has also been woven throughout this chapter, as I observe the participants as experts in their own narratives of loneliness. I have interrogated how inequalities emerge from, and speak to, power, and demonstrated the way the macro scale relates to the intimate level. In the following chapter, I scale down, and observe loneliness from the meso scale. Here, I see the meso scale as the participants' hometown.

Chapter 5. (Dis)Connection to Hometown and Loneliness on the Meso Scale: Imagined Geographies, Community and Belonging in County Durham

This chapter explores the experience of loneliness on the meso scale. The meso scale, as understood here, relates to the scale of the hometown, where the participants live and spend most of their everyday lives. Narratives of loneliness are often linked with arguments that suggest that there has been a breakdown in community, that the hometown no longer represents conviviality, and is instead a space that contains atomised individuals who are physically close, but socially distant (Putman, 2000). This is not what I argue here. Instead, I take this scale and engage with the complex emotional geographies of place. I draw on the ways that everyday life, emotion and relationships, which are the key areas in my understanding of loneliness, affect – and are affected by – place. I do this in three ways and across three sections in the chapter, elaborated in turn below.

Across all three sections, I weave together the life stories of Holly, Ashleigh, Lily, Liam, Louise, Adam, Steven, Grace and Sophie. As I identified in Chapter 3, the 22 participants who took part in this research have been clustered into 4 groups following my analysis. This Chapter, however, differs slightly in that I have included life stories from individuals in different analytical clusters. This has been done on purpose. My aim in this chapter is to also highlight the complexity of place, and the delicate balance between (dis)connection and the intimate, intersectional and diverse lived experiences of the participants. This chapter therefore explores the contradictions, the complexities and the unique relationships that these participants have with place, and what this means to their experience of loneliness.

Section 5.1 explores the imagined geographies of County Durham. I question how County Durham has been represented and internalised by the participants, to understand how a sense of cultural isolation is reproduced (Crossley, 2017). I weave together this cultural isolation with norms and expectations of adulthood, highlighting the everyday geographies and identities of County Durham millennials which provide space for loneliness to endure. I also draw on how this creates a sense of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006) and allows a relational geography of loneliness to develop. What is new here, is the connection I am building between cultural isolation, loneliness, representations of adulthood, and the spatiality of loneliness that arises from these intersecting affects.

Section 5.2 draws on the idea of *feeling known*, and feeling observed, scrutinised and suffocated by living in a tight-knit, all-knowing community. Here, too, I theorise that disorientation and a relational geography of loneliness emerge from the lived experience and individual lifeworlds of the participants in this chapter.

Finally, in Section 5.3, I also explore how a connection to place can ease feelings of loneliness, and that a sense of belonging and comfort in place can help ground participants and promote emotional wellbeing. I argue that the relationships that are embedded in place, are crucial to *reorientating* the disorientated and lonely, and that comfort, connection, confidence, and community are all powerful in warding off feelings of loneliness.

5.1. The imagined geographies of County Durham: cultural isolation and loneliness

This section considers how County Durham is imagined, and the ways in which this is understood, internalised and *felt* in the everyday lives, emotions, and relationships of the millennials in this research. I draw on how the North East of England more broadly, and County Durham specifically, is captured in the imaginations of my participants, particularly drawing in on the ways that there is a sense of cultural isolation (Crossley, 2017; McKenzie, 2015). I question how tropes of being ‘left behind’ or ‘backward’ permeate this region, and feed into how the participants feel about themselves, others within the local area, and how they see themselves situated and represented within broader society and media. This connects to my understanding of loneliness as a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state. This section thus helps unpick this multi-scalar and multi-sited definition by homing in on the emotional geographies and imagined geographies on the meso scale, in this way revealing how cultural isolation and individual expressions of loneliness speak to one another. Further, this helps contribute to the relational geographies of loneliness, which is key to the conceptual framing of this project.

By understanding the imagined geographies of County Durham, I develop an understanding of the relationship to place, and the relationships to people that are situated within, and are ‘markers’ of, place. I examine how these relationships create space for loneliness to grow, expand, and infiltrate the spaces of everyday life. Further, I consider how, at the same time, loneliness can then manipulate, transform, *affect* space. I am thus building on the literature introduced in Chapter 2. I approach place in this thesis as a relational geography of loneliness, which examines how imagined geographies (Crossley, 2017; McKenzie, 2015;

Taylor, 2012) and a sense of belonging (Probyn, 1996; Walkerdine, 2010; Yarker, 2019) can affect the emotional relationship to one's hometown. Rather than approaching the hometown in relation to memories and nostalgia (Bonnett, 2015), I see literature on imagined geographies as providing the language to ascertain how dominant representations of place can affect a personal sense of, and connection to, place.

This relational geography of loneliness, explored as imagined and at this scale, helps unravel how loneliness is encountered, and how it affects the everyday lives, emotions and relationships of County Durham millennials. To do this, I present the life stories of Holly, Ashleigh, Lily, and Liam, who each spoke viscerally of the culture of their hometowns, the ways they felt as if they did not *fit*, and how this made space for loneliness to develop. I begin by drawing on Holly's story, who was first introduced in Chapter 4.

As I began my interview with Holly, and we were exchanging conversation about where we were from and where we lived, she joked about Consett being "backward" and mused that she could not believe she had "ended up" and "still" lived there. This set the tone for the interview, as she reflected on her mostly negative associations and feelings towards the place she lived and worked. Holly was originally from Gateshead in the North East of England. She had also spent time living and working in Portugal and Amsterdam as a teacher. At the time of the interview, she was considering a move to North Northumberland, as she was motivated to leave behind "this Consett life". The way she phrased this alluded to the sense of *smallness* she drew on in her narrative of Consett, and her relationship to her hometown. These feelings towards place had also been the motivation for her to leave and teach abroad, reflecting on her reasoning at the time as every day being like "groundhog day" and "there's got to be more than this...I've had enough, this can't be my life, this Consett life, there's got to be more".

This sense of wanting there to be *more* speaks to a desire to push against the smallness and limitations she saw as being associated with Consett, and it explains her wanting to relocate at the time of the interview. Holly's emotional disconnection to place was largely a result of feeling different to the people who lived in her hometown, and who she worked with. This was explored in Chapter Four, as she reflected on her status of living alone, not wanting to be married or have children, as setting her apart and out-of-sync from her local community and colleagues. Here, I consider how Holly's view of the local area, and how she imagines the

place and the people she encounters in everyday life, as being imbued with characteristics that are fundamentally opposite to how she views herself and her aspirations. This was particularly pertinent in her response to my questioning about a sense of community in Consett:

“So I always felt the community was quite strong, but I do think a lot of it’s based on insiders and who...which church you went to and with who...and I don’t have family roots in County Durham, at all, really, so it’s quite tricky for me” – Holly

“You can’t make things that isn’t...like when I was abroad, you were a group of ex-pats who were all chucked at the same situation. Well, I’m not gonna find a group of people in Consett that are like me. Those people just don’t exist...the local area doesn’t lend itself well for that kind of thing” - Holly

There was therefore a sense of exclusion that Holly felt. While she felt this most strongly in the workplace, which she reflected was full of cliques and a coldness from her colleagues because she was not like them, this also translated to her emotional disconnection to Consett more broadly. In her comments that there was no one like her, and that the area is unlikely to facilitate connections, there is a sense of disorientation in her surroundings, as she feels her body does not *fit*, and the ability to connect to others is limited. She attributes this to a community that is present for some people, particularly those who had family roots in County Durham, and links to the local church. As was argued in Chapter Four, there is a degree of *inbetweenness* that Holly reflects on, as a lack of belonging has featured throughout her life. Yet, in this chapter, these feelings of not belonging and the disorientation she feels, can be made sense of by considering the imagined geographies of Consett and County Durham. Her continued references to Consett being “a bit backward”, “stuck in the past” and unaccommodating to her as “progressive” and “open-minded”, firmly highlights her perception of her hometown, and the friction she feels between her personal identity and the identity of place.

While it is undoubtedly a generalisation that an entire geographical area shares common values and personality traits, this is how Holly has been made to *feel*. Not only has she absorbed the attitudes directed towards her in the workplace, which she has attributed to the *mood* and principles of Consett, there is also the sense that she sees the “ills” of the area being inherently connected to the people that live there (Crossley, 2017). There is therefore the sense that her *inbetweenness* of being *othered* in a place that is *othered* and culturally

isolated, has a disorientating effect leading to personal feelings of loneliness. The imagined geographies, and how they are reflected inwards (McKenzie, 2015) are, I argue, intimately connected with feelings of disorientation and loneliness. Exploring these ideas on the meso scale helps give a more thorough understanding of how loneliness emerges in everyday hometown spaces, lives and relationships. Holly's experiences are similarly encountered by others in this research. I next turn to Ashleigh's story.

Like Holly, Ashleigh's lifestory was explored in Chapter 4. She, too, spoke of the ways that expectations of adulthood, relationships and lifestyle had left her feeling disorientated and out-of-sync with other millennials. Ashleigh also attributed this to the very specific culture of the area she lived in. Living in Easington, County Durham, she remarked on a distinct disconnection to where she lived, telling me she had "no attachment to it" and she lived there solely because her house was cheap. While she had grown up in County Durham, and this is where her family lived, most of her friends lived in Sunderland, which is where she had gone to school. Though Sunderland is only approximately 7 miles away from where she currently lives, this felt like a significant distance to Ashleigh, and it meant she usually had to be the one to travel to see her friends and get taxis home alone in the opposite direction after a night out. These "little things" created a social and spatial distance to her friends, despite the actual geographical distance being relatively small. As a result of this she felt physically isolated in an area she had no emotional connection to. In addition to this, and like Holly, she did not see her hometown as a place which could facilitate new connections, as nobody was "like her".

"And I think especially where we live as well, I think it's like, it's sort of a generation thing, it's the mindset of quite a lot of people and we live in quite a small area, and people are pretty much like, they've worked, they've got married, they've had children. And, like, sometimes it's 'you're out of the box' effect." – Ashleigh

"I think if I was to bump into someone random from around here and talk to them, I think they'd ask 'are you with someone? Have you got children? Are you married?' that's just the first thing they'd say to you. Nobody says, like, are you ok? What's your job?. They always say are you married? Do you have children? And it's, like, why are they the first questions you'd ask somebody? They're not the first questions I'd ask someone." – Ashleigh

Ashleigh reflects on how these questions relating to her relationship status and whether she has children, make her feel "out of the box", like she does not belong, and as though she is

othered in the place she lives. Whether this is the case for everyone in the area, Ashleigh sees heteronormative expectations and young adulthood ideals woven into the imagined geography of County Durham, leaving her feeling culturally isolated and disorientated. Further, she draws on what she sees as the particular spaces and habits of socialising in County Durham which she, again, sees as particular to the area:

“I think that’s the culture around here where we live. People are like, our age and older, still live for the weekends and still go to someone’s house drinking to like 6 o’clock in the morning. And at what point do you think ‘no’? do you know what I mean?” – Ashleigh

Here, Ashleigh is sharing with me why she has distanced herself with a large group of friends she previously spent most of her free time with. Further, and for the same reason, she no longer sees her cousin as they drink, take drugs, and socialise in a way that Ashleigh no longer feels comfortable doing. Her reference to the culture “around here” also speaks to a very specific image, identity and traits she sees as inherent to County Durham.

A reference to drinking culture in the North East was a recurring theme in this project, with multiple participants telling me they felt lonely growing up, and in the present, because they did not want to drink alcohol and socialise in this particular way. I had not anticipated this before going into my research, and these responses were therefore completely unprompted and shared with me as a response to unstructured questions about their life story. Out of the 22 participants I interviewed, 13 shared with me that they felt lonely because they were not interested in drinking alcohol. Each one of them saw this as an expectation of young adulthood, and that not drinking made socialising and maintaining connections difficult as it meant they were often isolated from social events. Ashleigh, however, saw these norms as explicitly linked with living in County Durham, as did Lily, Liam and Steven, whose stories and reflections are threaded throughout this chapter.

“I think yeah...because I think in the North East....I think it’s erm....quite a big thing. Like drink culture. I think it’s aww you go out on a Friday night and you have a drink...and if you don’t want to do that...a lot of people think you’re weird and...I dunno I think....I just think well I don’t want to be friends with you if that’s what your attitude is. Even...like even my friends at uni...I mean I remember going to the student bar – even during the day – and I’d be like aww I don’t want to have a drink and they’d be like ‘go on, go on!’ and I’d be like ‘no, I don’t want to’...and people would be like aw why?” – Lily

As the North East of England has some of the highest rates of binge drinking in England (Castillo, 2017), it is therefore not unreasonable or *imagined* that the culture of County Durham is so closely associated with drinking norms by the participants. However, I argue here that these norms are considered the *defining* traits of their hometown's culture and are integral to their understanding of place identity. There is the sense that, by viewing drinking culture as the core quality of County Durham, these participants have absorbed negative representations of the area and, as a result, feel othered *within* a place that is *othered* itself.

Liam, who I introduced in Chapter 4, too, reflected on the ways that drinking and "lad culture" had made it difficult for him to form close connections. As with other participants in this section, Liam saw stereotypical expressions of masculinity as inherent to the North East. Here, however, I want to draw on his reflections about his hometown in relation to neoliberal norms and representations of adulthood. Notably, Liam felt a sense of guilt and shame that he had remained in Newton Aycliffe, when the rest of his peers had moved away.

"I used to hate it for a long time, because I felt like I was missing out on the experience of living somewhere a bit more busy. I've come to accept now that that wasn't me and I wouldn't like...it is hard sometimes...like I've got a good...I've got a friend who I've been friends with for a long time, the one friend I have had for a long time since I was like 4 year old, and he moved to London. And he's been travelling around South America and stuff like...and I hear him talking and, you know, he hears me talking...and, like, now he's living in a big multicultural place...it's like two different worlds, you know? I'm like...and I think, like, sometimes, because I am quite intelligent like...I sometimes wish I'd have pushed myself more to maybe to do something like that..." – Liam

Liam's reference to being "quite intelligent" alongside the suggestion that he should have pushed himself towards living in a busy, multicultural city, as well as travelling, speaks to narratives of mobility, success, adulthood and place (Taylor, 2012). What is interesting about Liam's reflections, and as I outlined in Chapter 4, is how leaving his hometown is something he felt he *should* do, and not necessarily what he wanted. This connects to the aspirational discourse of neoliberal adulthood I outlined in Chapter 2 (Hardgrove et al., 2014; Macleavy, 2008; Pimlott-Wilson, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014).

Liam is therefore caught in a space where he feels like he is not living up to the expectations of young adulthood while, at the same time, reflecting that he does not *fit* in his hometown. I argued that this sense of being in-between left Liam feeling out-of-sync and *stuck* in Chapter

4. I build on this here by arguing that the cultural representation of his hometown fosters a sense of cultural isolation. Further, I outline that this has encouraged Liam to carve out his own space, and *push back* against feelings of disorientation. Liam shared with me that he thrived on a sense of community because he “wasn’t an individual” and was, instead, motivated by feeling connected to those around him. He noted that Newton Aycliffe did not facilitate connections for those in his age group. He also had a strong sense of the past and what community had looked like *before*, telling me that community spirit – or his understanding of it – was something for those of the older generation:

“...it’s quite sad because it’s a bit, I think it’s more geared towards those who aren’t in our age category, just older people really, you know? Probably like people in working men’s clubs and things. It’s probably the same everywhere really – there’s no...whereas 30, 40, 50 years ago, that’s where everybody would go. People don’t...people socialise in different ways now, I think. And I do think that’s a bit sad...because I think in ten year time, like, a lot of the places around here will be gone, like, you know...I hope not.” – Liam

Here, Liam is referencing a fading away of spaces and norms of socialising that he sees as key to making connections and a sense of belonging. While there *are* other ways for young adults to socialise, and this was demonstrated by my interviews with some other participants living in Newton Aycliffe, this vision of what community spirit, place, and socialising looks like, is important to Liam’s experience of loneliness. His vision of community is rigidly tied to conversations with his Grandad, whose memories and reflections have been inherited by Liam to an extent. As a response to these feelings, Liam had spent the last year before our interview contributing to the community in his own way. He had joined the local radio station, which made him feel closer to the local community, and had formed a local group who met up to do karaoke every week. Here I am not making a value judgement on Liam’s vision of community, particularly as he has worked hard to carve out and replicate this idea. Instead, I am drawing on how the imagined geographies of place, which have been filtered through his grandparents’ romanticised reflections rather than broader socio-cultural portrayals, ultimately shape his relationship to place. This affects his emotions, relationships and everyday life, leading to feelings of loneliness. The cultural isolation in this sense arises from his black and white imaginings of place. Feeling isolated by the representation of the area from family stories and seeing the present as *lacking*, plays an important part in Liam’s

narrative of loneliness. I return to Liam's story in section 5.3 to explain how remembered conversations with his grandparents contribute to a sense of belonging and reorientation.

This section explores how the negative stereotypes of an area, alongside the broader expectations of young adulthood, can lead to participants feeling othered in a place that is othered more broadly. Thus, in feeling disorientated by these representations, that have been internalised, there is room for relational geography of loneliness to develop. In feeling different, these participants find themselves both socially and spatially excluded, which also affects the relationship to the space around them, as it feels *small, restrictive* and *boundaried*. With Holly seeking "more", Ashleigh feeling "out of the box" and Liam yearning for a fixed notion of community, there is a sense that the space of their hometown does not feel as though it is *for* them. Further, shaped by this, loneliness creeps in and takes up space in their everyday lives, infiltrating their feelings towards themselves, others, and wider society. This arises from their imagined geography of their hometown, with their emotions and relationships in the spaces they encounter every day, transformed by the representation of, and internalisation of, conceptualisations of County Durham. A relational geography of loneliness can therefore be theorised. As in these life stories, space – or how it is imagined and internalised – can produce loneliness, and how loneliness can produce space which feels exclusionary and disorientating.

The next section continues the focus on the meso scale as an important entry into understanding millennial loneliness in County Durham. Here, I draw on ideas around close-knit communities, and how they feature in narratives of connection, community, loneliness, isolation, and place.

5.2. Feeling known: solitude, privacy and loneliness

This section explores the concept of 'feeling known' and interrogates the relationship and tension between feelings of loneliness, solitude and privacy. As I highlighted in Chapter 1, the term loneliness can be confused with isolation, aloneness, and solitude. While historically solitude is considered a positive state of being alone, I want to argue here that a lack of solitude – and privacy – can be socially and spatially suffocating, playing a pivotal role in feelings of loneliness. This speaks to what is described as *loneliness in a crowd*, where there is a disconnect between assumptions of togetherness and the reality of loneliness. With this section, I also want to challenge narratives of loneliness being connected to a breakdown of

close-knit communities. The life stories in this section, from Louise, Steven and Adam, all draw on their hometowns and those that live there as being deeply embedded within one another's lives. They reflect on their communities as *all-knowing* in terms of their personal, familial, social, working, and everyday lives and relationships. Here, I therefore explore the role of close-knit communities, that are widely considered quintessential to County Durham, and how these exacerbate feelings of disorientation and a relational geography of loneliness. I begin, first, with Louise's story:

Louise is 28 years old and lives in Durham City with her husband. She works full time and has a couple of friends she is very close to. She lives within walking distance of her workplace, and she is often alone in the office due to colleagues taking advantage of remote working practices in the company where she works. This means that she often spends her working days alone, and in silence. As her husband commutes a further distance to work, he leaves for work before her, and comes home late, which means when she gets in from work, she is alone in the house for hours. While much of her account of loneliness came from the structure of her working days, the temporal mismatch in her and her husband's working lives, and her limited group of friends, she also contrasted this with the loneliness she experienced growing up in Consett. She had purposely left Consett for Durham with her husband as she felt suffocated by the sense of being well known. This had the effect of limiting her ability to carve out her own identity, and she felt she had a lack of privacy and solitude:

"my mum used to run the bingo in Consett and I used to finish school and like I'd normally go up...my mum and dad are separated so....I would go up to bingo so...all the old ladies in Consett know me. So there's definitely a thing of like – I couldn't have larked about with my friends because it would just get back to my mum and you know....they'd be like 'oh I saw you holding hands with that boy' 'aw Linda, Linda do you know about this?' [laughs]. So yeah it's nice because I feel certainly more of my own person now that I'm like...that I'm not 'Linda's daughter in Consett' I'm just me now." -Louise

In Louise's reflection, she draws on a sense of being observed and of lacking privacy because she was growing up in her mum's shadow. She explained that every time she goes to Consett, everyone remembers her, knows intimate details about her life that her mum has shared, and she finds it hard to break away from the perceptions of the person she was in formative years. While this sense of being known held no sinister intentions from the "old ladies in Consett", and in Section 5.3 I draw on life stories where this would be considered in a

positive light, Louise encountered a lack of privacy and opportunities to express her own identity. She shared that this made growing up more difficult, and she left Consett as soon as she could. The powerful reference that Louise makes to being “just me now” illustrates my argument that the socio-spatial suffocation of being well-known in a tight-knit community can prevent some people from being able to ‘fit in’ and express themselves. Further, this closing down of solitude and privacy can be a lonely space to be, as personal autonomy can be restricted and the everyday life, relationships and emotions feel *observed*. I therefore argue that this forms a relational geography of loneliness, which I will continue to flesh out throughout this section. Next, I turn to Steven’s narrative of loneliness and his sense of feeling known.

Steven is 20 and lives in a small, rural town in County Durham, where his family have lived for generations. Throughout Steven’s interview he made it clear that he was a very private person – he did not post or share his picture on his social media accounts, he did not like to talk about his personal life, and he was the only person in my research who did not allow me to record our interview. He told me that the only reason he felt comfortable sharing his story of loneliness with me was because he would never see me again. For our interview we also met in an area which was not in his hometown and he told me he would not want anyone to know he was taking part in the research or be seen by someone he knew. It was therefore clear throughout our interview that he felt discomfort in feeling known or ‘visible’. While he did share with me that he had trust issues and this was a key and contributing factor to his experience of loneliness, he also made a clear connection to the role of his hometown in his understanding of why he felt lonely.

Steven was very well known in the town where he lived and would regularly bump into people he knew. Rather than bringing a sense of belonging, Steven, instead, felt discomfort. Steven’s family history in the town, while well established and deeply embedded, was also complicated. He told me that an incident with his mother that brought him to the attention of social services resulted in him and his family becoming the subject of gossip. He therefore felt very “visible” and as though he could not “do anything” without people talking about him or having an opinion. As a result, he isolated himself as much as possible to “keep himself to himself”.

Here, Steven's past experiences and family history have become spatially situated, with the trauma of his past being kept present through the collective memory of the local community. While he did not share whether people mentioned this incident to him, the fact that people in his town had this knowledge was enough for Steven to feel discomfort. His past therefore extended into his present and was structuring his everyday experiences and interactions. His history and experiences meant that his hometown felt inhospitable to him, and his future felt uncertain. He shared that a way to "fix" this situation would be to move away to find his own identity away from people who would not "judge him". Steven's everyday life, emotions and relationships were thus affected by the sense of feeling known. Next, I return to Adam, who I introduced in Chapter 4. Adam, like Steven, also had a difficult relationship to his hometown, and his account shared many similar themes.

Adam had a complex view of himself, others, and wider society, and his narrative of loneliness was multi-layered, complicated, and connected to a range of health issues, turbulent relationships, and a sense of stuckness (Hage, 2009) which I elaborated on in Chapter 4. Here I focus in on the ways in which loneliness has featured on the meso scale for Adam, particularly in his articulation of local community:

*"well there certainly is [a community] for a lot of people. For someone like me, no. Like my dad...he can go anywhere and talk to anyone. He knows basically everyone in town. Erm but...it's....for me it's not a sense of community for me – but for my dad he's obviously really...I wouldn't say he's sociable...he's very much the same but he certainly has – he certainly knows a lot more people. Because he's been living here his entire life. Erm...but that's not always been a good thing for me though...because with his used to being a security guard in Asda...so he's kicked a few people out...and they take that out on me. Because everyone knew him – everyone knew me. Erm so me and my brother always got comments like that..."—
Adam*

Adam is bothered by the proximity of two families that had bullied him when he was at school. In Chapter 6, I will draw on how this affects his sense of being home and his loneliness on the intimate scale. Here it is sufficient to consider how living alongside threats of animosity has shaped the way Adam moves through, encounters, and *avoids* the everyday spaces of his hometown. As a result of years of bullying, Adam prefers to stay indoors to avoid these two families. When he does go out, he avoids the street these people live on, lengthening his journey home. This is particularly significant given Adam's physical disabilities, which effect his mobility. This, alongside his sense of feeling known through his

dad, affects his feelings of loneliness in terms of his emotions, relationships and everyday life.

Emotionally, he does not feel safe, feels excluded and, like Louise and Steven, feels unable to carve out his own identity under the glare of people who know – or think they know – him. His relationship with and to others in the community is also largely filtered through the lens of his dad, as well as his school relationships. His everyday life is, too, greatly affected, as his everyday movements, actions, walking routes, and the times he goes in and out of the house, are all decided in relation to those that *know* him in the community. While Adam has a complex narrative of loneliness, and has a difficult and, at times, traumatic relationship to his hometown and those that live there, his story helps highlight how a sense of being known can be socially, spatially and temporally isolating. This results in Adam mostly confining himself in his home and I explore this in Chapter 6. Here, I theorise a relational geography of loneliness.

With Adam being deeply embedded in his hometown, and he and his family being well known, there is a sense that the space around him, the spaces he occupies, his sense of *being* in the world, is suffocating. Rather than the feelings of support, belonging, and connection that are drawn on in the following section, for Adam, and others, his personal time-space becomes restricted, stifling and overwhelming. I therefore suggest that the way Adam encounters space and time speaks to a relational geography of loneliness. The complex set of circumstances that lead to his feelings of loneliness – here explored as *feeling known* – make his world smaller. This shrinking and retreating, as he avoids particular spaces, times, and people, continues to isolate him, and his feelings of loneliness grow. Further, Adam's loneliness also reinforces this withdrawal from his hometown, and he is caught in a *dead end* (as argued in Chapter 4) which restricts his ability to break from this cycle of isolation. Loneliness thus creates a spatial dimension that causes Adam to be *stuck* (Bauman, 2005; Hage, 2009) in place. In this section I understand this as being related to feeling known, and the ways that exclusion, lack of solitude, and feeling observed can help foster feelings of loneliness.

I have also highlighted how feeling known can be suffocating, disorientating and provide fertile ground for a relational geography of loneliness to emerge. I have advanced on literature exploring a sense of belonging (Probyn, 1996; Walkerdine, 2010; Yarker, 2019) in

place, by considering the ways that loneliness can emerge from spaces of discomfort. The concept of (dis)comfort to belonging (Yarker, 2019) is thus developed to embrace how connection and loneliness surfaces in the everyday lives of County Durham millennials.

My aim in this section has been to challenge tropes that the breakdown of all knowing, deeply embedded communities can be the cause of increased isolation and loneliness. Drawing on the life stories of Louise, Steven and Adam, I have woven together their narratives to highlight how there is not only a presence of close-knit communities, but they can also be isolating. A lack of privacy and solitude can reduce the space and opportunity for personal identity and wellbeing to be preserved and, as a result, these participants reflected that their experience of loneliness was closely tied to feeling known. While the stories from Louise, Steven and Adam may not be narratives of exclusion based on social differentiation (Sibley, 1995), they do speak to a feeling of difference and disorientation. I thus argue, like Wilkinson (2020), that queer moments in seemingly “normal lives” can result in bodies feeling disorientated and lonely. Here, for these participants, I understand these queer moments as being the subject of local gossip, being viewed in relation to other family members, and feeling exposed in the glare of *feeling known* during young adulthood.

In the next section I continue the focus on the meso scale but contrast typically negative with more positive associations that participants attach to their hometown. So far, I have considered the ways in which loneliness can emerge when one feels culturally isolated, known, and disorientated. I want to end this chapter on a positive note by exploring how a sense of place can help *reorientate, soothe or quell* feelings of loneliness.

5.3. Re-orientated: comfort, connection and belonging

Here, I thread together the narratives of Liam, Grace and Sophie. I drew on Liam’s life story in Section 5.1 and continue it here to explore the often-contradictory nature of one’s relationship to place. Liam, and others in this research, had conflicting feelings towards their hometowns. Place attachment and (dis)connections are rarely clear cut. There are two aims to this section. Firstly, I embrace the literature on hopeful geographies (Castree et al., 2010; Cloke et al., 2020) and use this section as a constructive and active force to prescribe change, beyond critique. Secondly, I shine a light on the importance of place to emotion, relationships, and everyday life. While I have explored this already in this chapter, it feels important to acknowledge the positive role place can have in combatting feelings of

loneliness. I want to acknowledge how comfort, a sense of belonging and connection can help *push against* the space that loneliness takes up, shrinks, manipulates, and affects.

This section thus offers an argument for place as eliciting the kind of emotion that can fend off the relational geography of loneliness I have theorised so far in this chapter. The previous sections drew on the ways that place can have a disorientating effect, which I suggest links to feelings of loneliness. Here, I instead draw on how a connection to the physical environment, the hometown, can help orientate individuals. I consider this as a *reorientation* in the face of loneliness. This concept of reorientation is derived from, and inspired by, Ahmed's (2006) concept of (dis)orientation that has provided a valuable framework to my analysis and articulation of findings so far. Chapter 4 spoke to the ways the social infrastructure and "meantime spaces" (Cloeke et al., 2020) play an important role in personal wellbeing and easing feelings of loneliness. This section, instead, explores the emotional geographies of place, and the ways in which the deeply personal and intimate connections to place can be crucial to feelings of connection. To begin, I return to Liam.

As I stated in Section 5.1, Liam had in effect inherited an imagined geography of his hometown and an idea of community that derived from memories of his grandparents reflections and musings. While I highlighted the ways this made Liam feel culturally isolated, out-of-sync and as if he was *missing* something, here I want to acknowledge how his love and attachment to his grandparents also helps *reorientate* him through a connection to place. Liam's grandparents had died a few years prior to our interview, but had shaped, and continued to shape, Liam's everyday life, his relationships, and his emotions. They had lived in a small village in County Durham, which Liam continues to visit often:

"I always go back to, like...me family is from a little place called Coundon, which is a little village just outside Bishop Auckland, just like a tiny, little mining village – like something you'd see of Billy Elliott, you know? Erm and I always go and visit me grandparents graves, you know? I know that might sound really morbid but that's like...I don't know whether I get peace from that or...like especially when I've got something going wrong in me life, I always go up there. I feel really at home there, more so than I do here. I'll walk around, like, there's like an old trainline that you can walk down so I like to walk along there, which is nice. So, as I say, it's all little things on me own...So I've got lots of happy memories there, yeah. Both sides of me family are from there. Me other Granda was the butcher there and...it was a lovely little tight community there, you know?" – Liam

In this account, Liam shares with me that if anything is ever “going wrong”, he gains a great sense of peace and wellbeing by returning to the place his grandparents had lived. His reference to “all the little things” like walking along the old trainline, or visiting ordinarily mundane spaces like the streets his grandparents had lived on, or walked along with him, became places of extraordinary significance. They helped connect his present to the past. These connections beyond the present, these temporal and spatial ties, helped ease Liam’s feelings of loneliness in the periods he felt out-of-sync, or when his mental health was suffering. During his interview, and his narrative of Coundon, the place his grandparents had lived, he continuously referred to how the place “wasn’t much to look at”. He shared that many of the local businesses had closed down, windows were boarded up and there were high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. Alongside this depiction, he repeatedly shared how it meant a lot to him, and said he knew it was a bit “weird” or “morbid” that he liked to return there. It felt as though he was attempting to justify or pre-empt my judgement or my *imagined geography* of Coundon, by being self-deprecating about the place first. His ex-girlfriend had never “got” what he liked about the place and did not like to visit the area with him. He cited this as one of the reasons he felt their relationship had ended, as they were both very different, and she did not appreciate the place that held such a significance to him. The relationships – and the memories of them – that were concentrated and embedded in this small ex-mining village were what made this ordinary place extraordinary for Liam. They connected him to place and upon revisiting, he felt a sense of connection, belonging and enhanced wellbeing. The breakdown in his relationship with his ex-girlfriend was also, in some way, connected to his relationship to this place, highlighting the potency of his emotion and connection to the area. The ways in which place represents relationships, and how this can be *reorientating*, is also shared by Grace.

Grace is 28 and lives in Consett with her partner. She grew up in Consett and has a large, extended family living there. Her school friends, who she remains closest to, all live within a 1-mile radius of each other. She left Consett to go to university in Newcastle and while she made friends there, she reflects that this was the loneliest period of her life. Once she graduated, she moved back to Consett and commutes every day to Newcastle for work.

“...but yeah, like, it felt comfortable being at home...I mean there’s not much to like do in Consett, really. That’s why I like working in town [Newcastle]...and my friends do work in town as well so we’ll do the

restaurants and cinemas and stuff like that...but you can just drive and then have your family all around. Like all the people at work are kind of like 'why wouldn't you just...' – because we bought a house – 'why wouldn't you just move to Newcastle to be closer to work?' and it's like, I'd rather commute to work, than commute to my family and friends...because you're in it then."

Grace's reference to being "in it" suggests that she was *out of it* while at university, and gives an indication of the ways (dis)connection can be felt on the meso scale, and in relation to place. Being "in it" evokes a sense of being supported and being *held* in place. This could be understood by considering the psychoanalytical work of Winnicott (1953; 1964) and the use of the term "holding environment". In terms of infant development and attachment, to be held – emotionally and physically – is to feel a sense of security and comfort. While I have not taken a psychoanalytical approach in this research, this idea of a holding environment not only connects to Grace's feelings of security and comfort, it also links to the broader theme that has emerged throughout this project: loneliness disrupts, unsettles, and troubles a sense of security in individuals.

Grace continues her narrative of Consett and draws on how her friend – like Louise, Steven and Adam in Section 5.2 – dislikes the element of being known. For Grace, however, she takes comfort in this, and rejects narratives of mobility, leaving 'home' and neoliberal success that is often directed towards millennials.

"Like one of my friends she...I think she really enjoys living in the city and likes that not everyone knows her...whereas I like the comfort. Whereas she wants...she doesn't like that everyone knows who she is and what she's done in her life sort of thing ...but I do think that does stop you from being lonely...knowing that you have people around you"

"...I like it as a place as well. It gets a lot of bad press....it's quite erm....like I have a friend who's from down south and she's amazed at how she'll like work with someone and I'll know them. And it's like of course I know them, like, I went to school with them and like...I've got quite a big family so like my brother and my cousins and I know people from being friends with them and stuff and it feels comfortable. Things like – if you go to the supermarket – and you'll see people that you know and I think for some people they find that really not nice – but I like it, it feels safer, that you know...not that anything bad would happen...but you know there's people around here that I know and they know me and it feels nice" – Grace

In the two extracts above, Grace refers to feeling "comfortable" and "safer" because she regularly bumps into friends, family, and acquaintances in the local community. The sense of connection she gets from being around people she knows – and who know her – prevents

her from feeling lonely. This is in great contrast to the life stories in Section 5.2, and speaks to the complexity of place, as well as the ways that the intimate and intersectional lives, histories, and relationships of individuals are important in considering place attachment, belonging and connection. For Grace, she clearly feels a degree of confidence, belonging and comfort in her surroundings (Yarker, 2019) and she links this to her sharing common ground with people in Consett – something she did not feel while living in Newcastle. My research and analysis resonates with Yarker’s (2019) claim that confidence in place can connect to a sense of belonging. Grace’s confidence and *deep knowing* of Consett and those that live there is articulated as being key to her attachment and happiness in place. This helps to continue to flesh out the ways (dis)connection and place play a role in narratives of loneliness. Further, it speaks to how these feelings of comfort, connection, and safety rest delicately on the intimate differences and sameness between people in a specific geographic area (Sibley, 1995).

Sophie’s story differs slightly to Liam and Grace’s. While she does feel connected to her hometown *now*, this is only in response to a traumatic housefire at her home, which led to her encountering the local community. She shared that she had never previously spoken to her neighbours, or felt a sense of community, but after losing everything in the fire, she was overwhelmed by the care and support that was shown towards her and her partner.

“If you’d asked me two years ago I’d have said no, but after the fire, I was overwhelmed at how much community there was, but they were very close knit community, they keep to themselves and only really come out when they need to. So because of the fire, like I say, complete strangers like knocking on my door and just saying that we’ve managed to track down this. We’ve raided the community center so here’s some spare clothes. Like, what do you need, like, come for free meal, I’ll cook you a dinner, and because of that I’m like we spent a month in the Premier Inn and then moved into a flat, which was horrendous.”

“like I say, it was, it was all the people who have nothing. 'cause, like I say, that on that estate a lot of them are on benefits. A lot of them have three or four kids that they’ve go to pay for like, bless them, people were donating like half used bottles of things and be like sorry it’s not full, but it’s like it’s all I’ve got. And like I’ve tested this perfume, I don’t like it, do you want it 'cause I know you won’t have any. Yeah it’s like yeah it’s half used but like but that’s literally all you’ve got, yeah and sort of finding people who had nothing still give was really sweet” – Sophie

Sophie's narrative of loneliness centered on several transitions in her life, but the housefire remained the most significant in her life story. She lost everything she owned, as well as two dogs, in the housefire. This deeply affected her mental health, and she continues to live with the trauma of this. She described what was a "rippling effect" of the fire, as it not only impacted her life beyond the immediate loss and complete overhaul of her everyday life, but she also lost a lot of friends too. She told me that this was because of people not knowing "what to say" so they avoided her. This, she told me, was the loneliest period of her life. However, as evident in the extracts from our interview above, she also developed a deep sense of community and togetherness with her neighbours, which she had not previously felt. The act of people giving her anything they could, when they did not have a lot themselves, struck a chord with Sophie and she cited this as an important "turning point" to feeling a deeper sense of connection and reduced feelings of loneliness. This advances on arguments outlined in Chapter 2 that interpersonal relationships are enduring, mutually supportive and empathic (Elder, 1994; 2000; Jarvis, 1999), transcending notions that "pure relationships" are the hallmark of modern relationships (Giddens, 1992). Sophie's story develops these ideas by highlighting that the kindness, care, and community shown by strangers can act as a pivotal moment to readdress ideas about loneliness and the negotiation of relationships.

This experience of neighbourly compassion inspired Sophie to look for ways to "give back" to the community. She and her partner decided to set up a "doggy diner" in the local area, which is a café that welcomes dogs, but also acts as a "hub" for connection, support and community. She explained that she was motivated by an understanding that a café such as this would have helped her to make friends and support her mental health, and others might likewise benefit. I interviewed Sophie at her café, and I was therefore able to see for myself the sense of belonging that this café provided. While frustrating from a research point of view, as our conversation was regularly disrupted and her train of thought was broken regularly, it was also powerful to witness the sense of belonging she had carved out herself: knowing everybody's name who came in; warmly greeting them; asking about their lives, relationships, dogs. She told me that her vision for the café was for it to be inclusive and welcoming and not to feel cliquy or hostile to new customers. This was important to counter the exclusion that she had encountered across much of her life.

In being welcomed and supported by the local community, Sophie was able to feel reorientated and gain a new sense of connection after a traumatic event. She then embraced this and carved out her own space in which to aid the reorientation of others in the local area. In doing so, she hoped – and from what I could see for the 2-3 hours I was there she successfully managed – to push back against incidences of loneliness. She is thus *pushing back against* the relational geography of loneliness that consumed her throughout her life and particularly after the house fire. Liam, too, had done this, as he carved out his own ways to engage in the community and fend off his own feelings of loneliness, as well as others.

Each of the stories in this section highlight the importance of relationships and the role of what is referred to in the literature as place attachment and close-knit community. For Liam, his grandparents are no longer here, but their memories and the embedded emotion of their presence in a small village were enough to transport him to a sense of peace, wellbeing and connection. For Grace, the knowledge that she was known, and could bump into someone known to her at any point, was enough to ward off feelings of loneliness. For Sophie, these relationships came later, and following personal trauma, but she was able to gain a new perspective and connection to her local area because of the kindness and care shown by the people that lived there. She thus *paid this forward* and told me that the most effective way to combat loneliness, for her, was to build a sense of community, and welcome people into the space she had created in an area she had since built a meaningful connection with. The way Sophie holds this positivity in the aftermath of trauma speaks to literature on the geographies of hope. Further, it resonates with Cloke et al.'s (2020) assertion that “meantime spaces” are not a substitute for real, structural change, but can be embraced and celebrated for the *hope* they provide. This research therefore builds on these ideas by outlining how the personal, intimate experiences of loneliness can inform understanding of connection on the community level. Further, by applying this lived experience and acknowledging members of the community as experts in their own understanding of (dis)connection (Richardson, 2020), spaces can be made to foster community, care, and connection.

This section has engaged with the idea that feeling a sense of connection, belonging, comfort, confidence, and community in a place, can help ward off feelings of loneliness. I have argued that observing County Durham millennials as experts in their own experiences of loneliness and belonging can help map out the ways spaces can be carved out to offer

hope and reorientation. I expand on this in Chapter 7, where I offer policy recommendations for combatting loneliness.

Further, I have argued that the ways in which relationships are embedded in place, and the associated emotions, have a profound effect on the way place is navigated and experienced. Here, this has resulted in a reorientation, following the disorientation of being different, out-of-sync, excluded, and disconnected. I also argue that a connection to a physical place – even if this is primarily related to relationships to the people who live, or have lived, there – helps *push against* the space that loneliness takes up, absorbs, infiltrates, *produces*. This resonates with arguments outlined in Chapter 2 that comfort and confidence in place can foster a sense of belonging (Yarker, 2019). It also refutes assertions that there has been a breakdown in community, and this is the reason for increased loneliness (Putnam, 2000). This research therefore uniquely brings together these ideas to highlight the experience of loneliness and connection on the meso scale. Strong relationships, a sense of community, and togetherness, thus all have the potential to ward off loneliness and guard against a growing relational geography of loneliness that I have theorized in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 of this chapter.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have approached the experience of loneliness on the meso scale. Using the life stories of 9 participants, I have built on the ways everyday life, relationships and emotion have been encountered within the hometown. In doing this, I have captured the complexity of relationship to place, and how this speaks to feelings of (dis)connection and loneliness. In particular, relationships have been at the centre of this chapter, altering the way place is encountered, navigated, felt, and experienced. This speaks to my overall understanding of loneliness as a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others, and the state.

Section 5.1 drew on the ways County Durham is imagined, and how this is (re)produced and internalized by the millennials in this research. Here, I have therefore argued that the cultural isolation of place (Crossley, 2017) has the affect of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006) and othering, which can lead to feelings of loneliness. However, and further, these feelings of loneliness have the affect of shutting down the space around those who feel culturally isolated *within* a place that is culturally isolated more broadly. Being caught in a double bind of isolation, these participants see loneliness expanding around them, creating a social and spatial distance to the people and place of their hometowns. I thus theorise a relational

geography of loneliness here, which proposes that loneliness can produce space which feels exclusionary, othering, and disorientating.

Section 5.2 explores how feeling known within the community could have an othering effect, too, and I challenged assumptions that a breakdown in community is at the root of incidence of loneliness (Putman, 2000). Further, I use the life stories in this section to highlight how there is, indeed, a presence of deeply-embedded and seemingly *all-knowing* communities in County Durham. Rather than bringing a sense of belonging, comfort and confidence (Yarker, 2019), they instead instill a sense of unease, disorientation, and loneliness. This refutes the suggestion that close-knit communities can be the panacea for loneliness and isolation. Drawing back to my framework in Chapter 2, I propose capturing the “queer moments in seemingly normal lives”, which is inspired by Wilkinson’s (2020) call for geographies of intimacy. This section identifies these queer moments as *being* and *feeling* known during young adulthood. These moments are thus understood as a gateway to understanding the relationship, and tension, between solitude, privacy and loneliness.

With both of these sections, I drew on the idea that feeling disorientated in place could result in loneliness, and I theorized an emergence of a relational geography of loneliness. Section 5.3, instead, highlighted the ways a connection to place can provide comfort and belonging, and that this was often a result of the relationships to other people who were connected, in some way, to the place. In this section I develop on Ahmed’s (2006) language of (dis)orientation and argue that the participants are *reorientated*, following periods of disorientation and loneliness, by the environment they occupy. Importantly, this section also makes a small contribution to literature on the geographies of hope, and I flesh this out further in Chapter 7, where I make policy recommendations.

The hometown thus forms an important site, and scale, to understanding the geographies of loneliness, and the intimate realities of millennials in County Durham. Following on from this attention to the meso scale, Chapter 6 homes in closer, to explore the intimate scale of the domestic sphere and the embodied geographies of loneliness.

Chapter 6. Loneliness on the Intimate Scale: Embodied Geographies and (Dis)Connection in the Domestic Sphere

This chapter approaches the experience of loneliness at the intimate scale, which is understood here to be within the home, relationships, and as embodied. It explores how loneliness is felt, encountered, heightened, relieved and navigated on the embodied scale, as well as in the domestic sphere. By drawing on this close, intimate scale, my aim is to highlight how private, and often hidden, lived experiences of loneliness are. This chapter will therefore build on these individual life stories by demonstrating the painful realities of everyday life, and contribute to the overarching argument of this thesis: that spatial-temporal context plays a key role in the incidence of loneliness. My analysis will engage, tie together, and build on, literature on embodied geographies, politics and geographies of the home and geographies of austerity and everyday life. These literatures help make sense of the findings, and this chapter continues to situate loneliness within these debates. The chapter will thus contribute to the overall aim to politicise the subject of loneliness, highlighting that this is not only individual, but unevenly encountered, and socio-economic context risks burgeoning loneliness.

When referring to the material site where participants reside, I have chosen to refer to this as the domestic sphere. Home can be a contested term because it can be comprised of a country, a city, a street, physical building, a person, a feeling. It can also elicit a series of different, overlapping emotions: happiness, comfort, fear, refuge, loneliness. Home can also represent a container for various and complex relationships, whether this is friendship, familial or romantic (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Jupp et al., 2019; Nowicki, 2014). The term home in this sense is loaded with multiple meanings and emotions. By using the term domestic sphere, I am making a distinction between the physical space, and the relationships that are housed within this space – both of which I will draw on. This helps clearly separate the two, giving a more in-depth analysis of loneliness on this intimate scale.

This chapter is split into three sections. I outline loneliness as something that manipulates time-spaces and infiltrates relationships, whilst also emerging from particular time-spaces and in response to personal relationships and relationships to, with and between broader socio-economic structures. I am thus building on Anderson's (2004) concept that boredom

can still time and slow space. Here, I am arguing that loneliness not only affects time-spaces, but time-spaces can affect loneliness, too. I therefore continue to develop my concept of a relational geography of loneliness here.

Section 6.1 examines the role of *crunch points*, drawing on the ways that time-spaces can become imbued with imaginaries and feelings of connection. The concept of crunch points was outlined in Chapter 2. I conceptualised this term by building on Thomson et al.'s (2008) "critical moments". Here, I take crunch points to mean the ways an individual responds to a life event, and how this affected by their socio-economic resources, as well as the norms and expectations of neoliberal adulthood. In this chapter I argue that when time-spaces are encountered differently to others or are abruptly altered by life circumstances, loneliness can be felt more acutely. Further, this section will also critique how these time-spaces absorb meaning, arguing that narrow representations of family life and relationships also exacerbate these crunch points, making them harder to bear.

Section 6.2 continues this examination of the relationship between loneliness and space. Drawing closer in on the intimate scale, I continue to argue that loneliness can manipulate how space is encountered. Altering the way the domestic space is navigated, I build on the politics of home (Jupp et al., 2019) by taking seriously the domestic sphere as a material site. I also expand on how it can be used as a lens to wider issues and power imbalances, and specifically what this means for incidences of loneliness. This section also explores how this affects the body, highlighting how a collision of particular circumstances and socio-economic context can be embodied and physically felt.

Section 6.3 takes a closer look at the personal relationships embedded within the domestic sphere. Specifically drawing on a clashing of norms and expectations, particularly on the multigenerational level. I will examine how these relationships can be (un)settling, producing, and fostering a complex set of feelings of connection and loneliness.

6.1. The crunch points of loneliness

This section is split into two sub-sections. To begin, I draw on the ways specific time-spaces in the domestic sphere can be imbued with imaginaries of connection, togetherness, family and friendship. I argue that occupying these time-spaces can speak to feelings of loneliness and connection. Secondly, I draw on the crunch points of relationship norms. I explore how

heteronormative representations of family and domestic life can be embodied, and felt as loneliness.

To illustrate these crunch points, and how they speak to the experience of loneliness, I draw on the life stories of four participants: Andy, Holly, Grace, and Sarah. Andy and Sarah are situated within Group 1 of the participant clusters. They have each faced structural barriers that relate to their experience of loneliness. Holly is from Group 3, where cultural isolation has profoundly influenced her personal feelings of loneliness. Grace is situated in Group 2, where neoliberal conceptualisations of adulthood have informed her narrative of loneliness. Despite these participants being selected from disparate groups from the overall sample, they are united in experiencing certain time-spaces as being representative of connection. I have therefore woven these individual life stories together, forming a collective narrative of loneliness as felt during these so-called crunch points.

This section features Andy's story. I draw on his life story in sections 6.11 and 6.1.2. His story was a rich account of the ways that loneliness is embodied, and his repeated reference to the spaces and times that he found loneliness to be overwhelming, inspired the findings and analysis of other life stories in this section. He also shared how relationship norms were embodied and felt as loneliness. He articulated this in his reference to feeling out-of-sync with his peers regarding their family lives. I connect this to the theory of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006) that I have utilised so far in Chapters 4 and 5.

In exploring these stories and experiences, this section will illustrate the time-spaces where loneliness emerges, whilst also taking a critical look at how everyday relationships and the domestic space are understood and normalised. To make sense of these findings, I will thread together literatures on embodied geographies, critical geographies of the home, and queer geographies, innovatively drawing these ideas together in order to gain understanding of these crunch points of loneliness on the intimate, embodied scale.

6.1.1. Time-spaces symbolising connection

Andy is 35 years old and lives in Newton Hall. He works as a lorry driver, which means his shifts are solitary, long and often during unsociable hours. His work pattern is four days on and four days off, and his days off are usually during the working week, making it harder to make plans with friends and family. When we met, he was going through a divorce, and living alone. He saw his three children every week, but confessed that he struggled not seeing them

every day. During his marriage, Andy had distanced himself from most of his own family, and spent the majority of his time socialising with his wife's family and friends. This meant that when their relationship ended, his relationship with this wider community also faded away. While he works alone, he connects with other truck drivers over the radio, which means he spends a lot of time talking to others, but this is just chatting about "rubbish" and he misses daily, meaningful connection and conversation. He did not want to be in a new romantic relationship at the time of the interview, but was using dating apps to meet people. He told me that this was the only way he knew how to meet people to spend time with, as he missed closeness and connection. He commented that he never expected to feel lonely at his age, seeing it as only something older people would experience.

The way Andy spoke of loneliness was striking in that he drew on the various time-spaces where these feelings were felt more keenly. While he stated that he generally felt lonely most of the time, and he attributed this to the end of his marriage, there were clearly particular times and spaces that made these feelings more unbearable to navigate. As a result, he avoided these time-spaces, in an attempt to dull these feelings:

"I sleep in the wagon. I don't have to sleep in the wagon but I choose to rather than going home to an empty flat. I used to try, I used to go home because I get paid regardless, I used to go home – but since me marital breakdown, I don't go home now because the kids aren't there, the wife's not there – so I just stay in the wagon. So say I was to do a 12 hour shift, I'd have 12 hours off that night and if I do 15 I'll have 9 – so it varies on what job I'm doing and what I've been given on how long I'll actually be off...but in a 24 hour period, I'll be by myself, over like 4 days a week. So it's whatever 70/80 hours a week I'm by myself"

"I don't tend to go home because I can...say I start at 5 in the morning...potentially I can work until 8 o'clock at night. I don't want to be...I only live 10 minutes away from work. 10 minutes away erm...I can be in the house for ten past, quarter past 8...but by the time I get home, have something to eat, get a shower...it's like uhh...I might as well have stayed in my wagon and gone and used where I'm parked. Plus it's free heating, free lighting...you know, I'm saving money on bills. Because I don't want to travel home to sit in me flat when I can sit in me wagon..."

There is something powerful in Andy's recording of the number of hours he spends alone. This highlights to me how keenly aware he is of his loneliness, and how this is embodied. The time spent alone is *felt*, as he counts the hours between human contact and isolation. Further, in choosing to stay in his wagon rather than return home to an empty flat, he is still

alone regardless, but it is what his flat represents to him, that makes his loneliness more acute and obvious. Where home was once a space that included his wife and children – and the noise, messiness, and busyness that came with it – it is now an “empty flat”. Again, while his feelings of loneliness were not soothed by avoiding his flat, and his wagon was inevitably less practical and comfortable, it is what his flat represents. Further, it is not only the emptiness of the domestic space that brings these feelings of loneliness to the surface, it is at certain times and doing certain tasks too:

“it’s not fun making a meal for one...and then freezing it all and having it for the next...so it’s like having the same meal for two days because you’ve got leftovers from the day before...there’s no fun in that. I miss making tea for everyone, I miss making a big batch of food and like...I miss all....I do miss all that.”

On the days when Andy was not working, and thus unable to sleep in his wagon, the act of making a meal for one felt empty and lonely. Once enjoying a meal with his family, the process of putting leftovers away to be eaten by himself the next day was a visceral and touching account of the ways time-spaces are charged with meaning and feelings of connection. Further, domestic chores such as preparing meals, washing up, laundry, that were once seen as tedious, at the same time represented family and home to Andy. Again, the busyness, the messiness, the sounds of his children, and the togetherness that these domestic chores, at this time of day (evening) was highly charged with emotion and meaning. Now, while living alone, these chores are seen as something to look forward to and to “kill time.” Previously cooking and cleaning was seen as something to get through in order to relax and have fun, these chores had turned into, for Andy, an event that broke up his day.

Here I am not suggesting that it is as clearcut as these chores and time-spaces equating to happiness and fulfilment before, and miserable and lonely now. It is about the ways that time and space has been manipulated and imbued with emotion – but also how his emotions and ideas of family and connection have made these spaces too. There is also something here about expected embodied tasks and his age. Andy tells me that he never expected to be alone and lonely at his age, and was used to a house full of family. His emotions and embodied experience of home – particularly on an evening and doing domestic chores – represented something synonymous with family, where he should be, and what he should be doing at those times, in the domestic space. To now be alone without the sounds, smells,

physical labour, and mental load of these acts, in this space, and at this time, means that his feelings of loneliness are not just emotional – they are embodied and felt physically.

Andy's interview revealed that inhabiting certain time-spaces meant that loneliness was physically felt, and that it is as much an embodied experience as it is a conscious feeling. This was a theme throughout the research, with participants telling me that they had not realised they were lonely, and that it was only after seeing my call for participation, or in some cases friends or family gently suggesting they may be lonely, that they came to the realization. This suggested to me that there was something unconscious about feeling lonely, that there was an unsettled feeling, but it was hard to name or realize. While this could be connected to shame or stigma around admitting loneliness, there could also be something about these time-spaces that elicit realizations of disconnect. Andy avoided his empty flat, because he knew there was an uncomfortable feeling, but he did not know it be loneliness.

This feeling of being *taken by surprise* was shared by others in the research. Grace is 28 and from Shotley Bridge. When I interviewed her, there was no obvious narrative of loneliness and I had at first wondered why she wanted to take part in the research. During analysis, it became apparent that Grace had drawn on a few occasions where she realised she had felt lonely – and while she was not necessarily as chronically lonely as some of the other people I interviewed, there were clearly occasions where she experienced feeling lonely acutely¹⁰.

These occasions also happened to be in time-spaces that she had internalized as being particularly marked with connection. Grace was from a large family and was used to being surrounded by her close and extended family in the area she lived. Her family home (the one she grew up in) was always loud, busy, and full of family and friends visiting. When she moved out with her boyfriend, she reflected on a moment on their first night where she became overwhelmed with emotion and started to cry. When she sat down to have her tea, she felt a sudden and unexpected sense of loneliness. While she said she was happy to be living with her boyfriend, this particular time and the ritual of sitting down at the table to eat food was something she associated with busyness, noise, chatter, and a closeness and camaraderie with her mam as “the only women in the house”. This contrasted with a quieter

¹⁰ I outline the temporalities of loneliness, as being either acute or chronic, in Chapter 1.

tea time, with her boyfriend who, she told me, was not “chatty” and rarely expressed his emotions.

While outside of the domestic space, Holly and Sarah also drew on these unexpected moments – or crunch points of realisation – where they felt jabs of loneliness. When Holly was out shopping one day, an activity that she and her late mam had often enjoyed together, she found herself overwhelmed with the sense of loss and began to cry. Sarah, who did not really have any friends or family, went to the pub one day for a drink to just feel surrounded by other people. Hoping that this would make her feel less alone, she felt overwhelmed by other people’s display of togetherness. She then shared that she had sat alone crying in the pub. Both instances are connected to a sense of loss. For Holly, she had recently lost her mam. For Sarah, it was the absence of something she perceived everyone else having, as she compared herself to those around her.

These sudden expressions of emotion, these crunch points where loneliness was abruptly realised and embodied, echoes Mountz’s (2017) concept of “affective eruptions”. Mountz (2017) draws on the way trauma can lie dormant only to resurface at unexpected times. This is built on further by Coddington and Micieli (2017), who understand these moments as “embodied echoes” of pain and suffering, which connect to both a sense of space and of time. These eruptions, echoes, *crunch points*, stretch across distinct places, spaces, and times, weaving together the past, present, here, now, then, there, self and other (Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017). These embodied experiences are deeply relational, connecting the personal circumstances and agencies of the individual, alongside the overbearing social structures that make these crunch points harder to bear, and loneliness more acute.

I argue that this connects to the concept of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Hitchen, 2020) that I outlined in Chapter 2, and engaged with in Chapter 4. Occupying a flat, going shopping, and sitting in a pub are experiences that can elicit a range of emotions. For the participants in this section, these time-spaces produced feelings of loneliness. The mundanity of some of these time-spaces, also lends itself to Ahmed’s (2006) theory of (dis)orientation. To be orientated is not always consciously observable. For those who occupy a time-space coded with heteronormativity – such as the domestic sphere at meal times – without *noticing*, suggests that these individuals are orientated. Further, these time-spaces, and within an affective atmosphere, may not provoke crunch points of loneliness for

everyone. I thus suggest that the unique and intimate lived experiences of an individual relates to the presence, and navigation, of crunch points that lead to loneliness. Further, with this sub-section I suggest that time-spaces imbued with norms around relationships and domestic life, can structure these crunch points and lead to feelings of loneliness.

6.1.2. Embodying relationships, experiencing emotion

Here, I return to Andy's story to help articulate the ways that relationship norms can connect to crunch points of loneliness. Andy shared how his homelife was particularly strained when he and his wife were separated but still living together. This was a challenging and fractious time, and he reflected that the thought of living alone had been particularly difficult for him to come to terms with. This was the first time in his adult life that he had never been in a (romantic) relationship, and the first time of living alone. He also did not expect to feel lonely: "I associated this kind of feeling with being older...like when you've been with your wife and you wife dies...when it happened at my age I'm like...I don't know what to do for the best".

These feelings of unexpected loneliness and his complex emotions surrounding living alone for the first time, were further exacerbated by his friends all living in nuclear family households. While Andy was very open with his friends and family about feeling depressed and lonely, and they told him to phone or meet up at any time, he was instead faced with difficulty as they were always busy with their own families. While Andy said he understood that they prioritized spending time with their wives and children over him, as he had done so himself, it made it harder for him to feel a sense of connection as those around him were not available to spend time with. This was further exacerbated by him working unusual hours when most people he knew worked 9-5 on weekdays. Instead, Andy turned to dating apps to meet people. He said he was not interested in forming a new relationship, but just missed the closeness of having someone to talk to and spend time with, commenting that he was not sure how else he could meet people at his age. There was therefore a sense of not only wishing to find some connection, but also that he felt disorientated and on a different path to his friends (Ahmed, 2006).

Andy's hesitance in living alone and what this means can be understood by taking a critical look at how the domestic space and family life is perceived and (re)produced. As explored in Chapter 2, everyday, mundane spaces – including the home – are repeatedly coded as

normalising coupledness, particularly heteronormative relationships and family formations (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Ramdas, 2012; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Wilkinson, 2013; 2014). These normalised expectations are socially embedded, with Halberstam (2005) drawing on the “temporal logic of heteronormativity” with marriage, cohabitation and reproduction expected to follow a specific order and at certain times across the lifecourse. These expectations are also reinforced by policy and law, increasing the difficulty for single people to live alone or create their own household formations (Wilkinson, 2013; 2014). In Wilkinson’s (2014) paper exploring single people’s geographies of home, it was found that due to the symbolism of the home being coded with heteronormative relationships, participants found returning to the family home to be exclusionary, as they felt “haunted” by expectation and pressure to be in a relationship. Here it can be seen that the family home as a physical space has become permeated with meaning that symbolises heteronormative relationships. I build on this queer reading of the home by arguing that particular time-spaces can symbolise connection, thus highlighting an absence of what is expected or desired.

6.1.3. Conclusion

This idea of “haunting” is something I want to expand on here, as I conclude this section. To haunt suggests a presence which, perhaps unexpectedly, has the power to provoke an emotional response in an individual. This has been found across both of the subsections here. Andy, Grace, Holly and Sarah all articulated how loneliness emerged, unexpectedly, in times and spaces that provoked imaginaries of connection. A haunting also suggests an imprint of something left behind, embedded in place, and a trace of something that was once there. For these participants, there was a sense of loss, with these emotions becoming embedded in intimate time-spaces. I therefore argue that these time-spaces are crunch points, and that norms around relationships and family life can structure these expressions of loneliness.

6.2. Embodied loneliness: shrinking space, stretching time

This section ties together the life stories of Megan, Sarah, Eve, Abbie and Adam¹¹. While their stories all intricately explore the lived experience of loneliness, I have selected their life

¹¹ Megan, Sarah and Adam are situated in Group 1 of the participant clusters (structural barriers and loneliness). Eve is situated in Group 4 (fractious relationships and loneliness). Abbie is situated in Group 2.

stories for this section as they all viscerally expressed how loneliness was felt and embodied, and the ways loneliness transformed their domestic space. Each of their life stories touched on loneliness in deeply personal and different ways, yet the way that loneliness caused their daily life and home to feel suffocating, overwhelming, and that their space was closing in on them and shrinking, united these narratives. This section will therefore explore these stories, weaving in the core concept of emotional geographies in this thesis: that emotions can affect space, and space can affect emotions (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Anderson, 2009; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Davidson et al, 2007; Pile, 2009; Thien, 2005). I build on this by shining a light on how loneliness and the domestic sphere coincide and relate to one another.

Following Jupp et al.'s (2019) proposition to move beyond the statement that the home is a complex site that is not a binary of refuge or fear (Blunt and Dowling, 2006), this chapter will focus on the politics of home. This means taking seriously the home as a material site that encapsulates real, embodied emotions and relationships, whilst also using the domestic space as a window to wider structural forces and power imbalances. This section will therefore explore the subjective experience of loneliness, whilst also 'spring boarding' from these participant stories to determine the ways that societal and neoliberal expectations of adulthood, gendered relations, care practices, and economic precarity all play a role in the everyday loneliness and shrinking of space.

This section is thus divided into two subsections to explore this. 6.2.1 highlights how gendered relations, care practices and expectations of adulthood relationships are embodied within the domestic sphere. I argue that navigating these emotions and feelings of loneliness manipulates time and space, building on Anderson's (2009) concept of boredom stilling time and slowing space. 6.2.2 explores the ways structural inequalities are embodied, *felt* and lived within the domestic sphere. I argue that loneliness is embedded into the austerity landscape and continue my conceptualisation of a relational geography of loneliness. This subsection highlights that the spatial-temporal positioning of County Durham millennials allows loneliness to persist.

6.2.1. Shrinking space, stretching time: embodying gender in the domestic sphere

Megan was introduced in Chapter 4 and I will start this section by continuing her life story. Megan has agoraphobia and it feels fitting to begin by drawing on Megan's lived experience of agoraphobia in a section that focuses on the shrinkage of space in the domestic sphere. In

Megan's own words agoraphobia is "feeling uncomfortable in unknown places and with unknown people". This means that she spends most days home alone, with her husband being one of the only people she sees, and he works full time. She sometimes sees her mam and other family members, but her physical and mental health makes leaving the house too difficult and she is unable to easily maintain these relationships. As her health worsens, and she remains on long waiting lists to gain appropriate healthcare and support, she is increasingly isolated, and her days are long and lonely.

She compartmentalises her days in an attempt to "fill them up," doing crafts, reading, light housework, and playing with her cats. This offers her some relief from the vast amounts of time stretching out in front of her each day, but she tells me she feels "stuck" and that she is "going nuts" being in the house all day. This is further exacerbated by the debilitating migraines she suffers from, too, which means she often has large periods of time where she needs to remain in bed, in the dark, unable to do anything at all. This causes her days to stretch and become agonisingly long, leaving her "in her head", which she pinpoints as making her feel extremely lonely. As time expands, her space shrinks. Her world becomes smaller, and her loneliness is felt more acutely, leaving her with no distractions. As she refers to loneliness being a result of "being in her own head," there is a sense that Megan fully understands loneliness as something that is embodied and coming from the inside out. This embodied loneliness is therefore exacerbated by, and exacerbates, the shrinking space and stretching time that makes this all the more acute.

Turning to Davidson's (2005) work on agoraphobia helps make sense of Megan's story. While Megan's home is suffocating and isolating, it is also "safe", compared to the unknown places and unknown people outside. Though she does spend most days in the house, she has started to attend a weekly craft group at Just For Women, a charity in Stanley, County Durham. She also has a sustained and important relationship with PACT House (introduced in Chapter 4) who provide help with her benefit application forms. Her ability to attend, and continue to attend, relies on the support of her husband physically walking her to the door of the craft class, and a trusted key worker from PACT House meeting her outside the building. She also manages to go shopping monthly, which she finds very hard, but is encouraged, supported, and comforted by her mam. These individuals therefore represent safety and security to Megan, and she is able to tentatively leave the safety and security of the home. If she is alone, she panics and further isolates herself, retreating into the home.

Davidson (2000), in her own research, found that the women suffering with agoraphobia felt exposed upon leaving the house, and that the home represented something solid and made them feeling ontologically secure (Giddens, 1991). Bordo et al. (1998:83) found that those with agoraphobia felt “substanceless” when away from secure people and places. This links to the thread that weaves throughout this thesis, in that loneliness has an unsettling impact on everyday life, with participants feeling ungrounded and without a solid foundation. While it is impossible to separate Megan’s agoraphobia from her health and her feelings of loneliness, especially as they all likely compound one another, I argue that the spatial and temporal aspect of agoraphobia in Davidson’s (2000) work helps flesh out my argument on loneliness. I argue that there is a relationship here between feelings of instability, navigating everyday spaces, and loneliness.

Further, Davidson (2000) draws on a gendered element of agoraphobia, exploring the participant’s lived experience of the anxiety disorder in both the home and in shopping malls. These highly gendered spaces and anxieties around crossing such gendered boundaries (or being unable to), fed into feelings of insecurity. An inability to take part in highly feminised tasks, like shopping, produced a sense of shame in the women, drawing on the ways that spaces become saturated with norms and expectations. As Bondi and Davidson (2005) note, this helps highlight the ways that everyday negotiations of space are highly gendered, even for those who do not have agoraphobia. Here, I am taking this further by not only exploring Megan’s experience of agoraphobia, but also her – and others’ – negotiation of the domestic space as being imbued with wider meaning, connected to overarching structures and power imbalances.

In Megan’s case, she expressed “guilt” over her inability to do housework when she was unwell, speaking to gendered norms around housework and womanhood (Bowlby, 2019). She also carried the burden of ‘blame’ for the deteriorating relationship with her in-laws, as she was unable to leave the house and see them very often. This appeared to have affected her significantly, as she spoke at length about a recent family fall-out, for which she was blamed. This stood out to me immediately as, given Megan’s mistrust of new people, unsurprisingly, our interview felt uncomfortable at times, punctured by repeated silences and monosyllabic answers. When she spoke about her relationship with her in-laws, however, there was a real sense of injustice expressed, feeling both anger and guilt that these relationships were not easily navigated. Again, these feelings of guilt are gendered, as

there is the expectation that women are the 'peacemakers' in the household, maintaining relationships and ensuring everybody's comfort. While Megan felt anger regarding the encounter, she reflected that guilt also weighed heavily on her. She is therefore embodying gendered expectations, which goes some way to show how these individualised expressions of emotion connect to wider, overarching issues. Further, the concentration of these emotions within the domestic sphere speaks to Jupp et al.'s (2019) calls for a politics of the home, that takes seriously the lived experience of the material home, as well as the emotions encapsulated there.

Eve and Abbie's stories, while different to Megan's lived experience, and each other's, also spoke to the ways that the domestic space is gendered, and how these expectations created a closing in effect, shrinking the space they inhabit. Both Eve and Abbie are full-time carers to their young children, and each spoke viscerally of how suffocating they found everyday life in the house with young children. Eve told me that she had never imagined her life to be this way:

"you're talking a couple of years where I hadn't worked at all. Erm and...I find that quite depressing. Mainly because my entire life surrounded...changing nappies, making tea, tidying the house...and I wanted more fulfilment than that. Erm I don't feel like that was my purpose, purely to do that. I want more from life. And I want the kids to see that they should want more from life than that as well – and that's important to me. It's always been in my mind that I don't want them to think it's ok to sort of just get married and not ever work again."

The repetitiveness of everyday life started to get to Eve, not only because she was concerned about being a "positive role model", but she found the monotony and smallness of her life starting to affect her wellbeing and relationships:

"I do keep myself busy, I do make sure I keep on top of the housework and things, but there's only so much you can do before you're like [sighs in exasperation], it's just another task and it never gets better. And then you start to get annoyed when people don't put their socks in the basket. You know something really stupid? And you just start to blow things out of proportion because to them it's like 'well I've got more important things to worry about than putting dishes in the dishwasher' but to me it's a massive part of my day. So I think well you could at least show me that respect. So I think things...things like...frustrations to me are in the house. So I might sort of nit-pick at things that I think [husband] could do more, or the kids could tidy up after themselves...but then I demand too much of people because of that. I mean they're only 3 and 4 and I kick off with them if they've got a

book out and they haven't put it back. So little things like that I think I'm more self-aware of now because I'm thinking well actually it doesn't really matter. It's very minor compared to what [husband] has to do on a day so like...like his work is quite taxing for him. It involves a lot of brain power, whereas, I dunno. And then I think like...like I do start quite a lot of fights because of it I think. But then I do it on purpose because I want a fight....does that make sense?"

Eve is responsible for the practical and emotional care and chores of the whole household. While this is not to say that she should not wish to work, her understanding of her life and role as trivial to that of her husband's represents an internalisation of patriarchal and neoliberal values. The suggestion that she is causing arguments because she wants a fight implies that she is taking the blame and full ownership of these frustrations, yet this undermines the crucial role of reproductive labour. There is also something spatial to the way she reflects on her domestic and family life. Her references to "nit-picking", "blowing things out of proportion", things that are "stupid" and "minor", suggests a preoccupation with the *small things*, as well as a sense of her actions pushing against the space closing in around her. This links with Megan's experience of the way time stretches and space shrinks, as the loneliness of her everyday life takes hold of, and manipulates, space and time.

Abbie, like Eve, cares for her young children full time. She told me how she felt trapped much of the time, as well as guilty for not working or doing anything "important with her life", which again links with narrow, neoliberal ideas about who and what matters, in relation to everyday life and (re)productive labour. Her feelings of being "trapped" were exacerbated by repetitive and monotonous tasks that so often linked with everyday life with young children. This made her world feel small, overwhelming and isolating.

She attempted to remedy these feelings by attending a baby group. However, on the one occasion she attended, she left early because she felt anxious, uncomfortable and like she "didn't fit". She told me that the group was cliquy, that everyone seemed to attend with friends they already had, and that nobody spoke to her and made her feel welcome. Upon arriving back in the house, her daughter cried as she had been playing happily, and she felt the "worst mam in the world" and "selfish" for putting her own comfort above her daughter's opportunity to play and socialise with other young children. This was clearly a painful memory for Abbie, and she was visibly upset when she recounted it. While she felt

trapped at home, her confidence was knocked and she retreated to the safety, monotony and suffocation she felt every day in the domestic sphere.

Jupp's (2019) research on Sure Start centres finds that these spaces acted as important hubs of care, connection, support and belonging for the families who used them. Writing in the context of austerity cuts resulting in these centres being closed down, Jupp draws on the devastation that closures cause, as they form a crucial role in the wellbeing, education, health and happiness of young children and their families. While Jupp acknowledged that some families found the centres exclusionary and did not feel a sense of belonging, the important message and key finding in this study was that the majority of people found them to be warm, inviting spaces.

For Abbie, the prospect of building a supportive and caring community outside the domestic sphere did not seem possible. She admits to being introverted and anxious, and places the blame on herself when finding it difficult to access these spaces. As a result her everyday space remains small and within the domestic sphere, her feelings and experiences blocking her from the inclusion that she assumes "everyone else" manages with ease. While spaces such as Sure Start centres, PACT House, and other supportive spaces (drawn on in Chapter 4), are crucial to supporting the wellbeing of the community, there is the question of what happens to those who do not necessarily fit, or feel they fit, when feeling lonely.

These findings connect with research I have done outside of this PhD (Kelly, 2022). This work drew on the community and social connections built in a toddler group. I found that in order to build a sense of community, and genuine warmth, care, and friendship, there needed to be longevity. As I outlined in Chapter 4, community groups and spaces are often threatened with risk of closure due to cuts to funding. Further, feeling comfortable in a space also promotes social connection, and in this project based at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, the adoption of *radical hospitality* helped the participants feel secure and welcome. Radical hospitality relates to the practice of proactively seeking people who need support, and ensuring those who often feel excluded and forgotten feel comfortable and supported (Pratt, 2011). Having worked and participated in this toddler group for a year, I can see how the approach in this group could have supported Abbie. For those who feel they do not *fit*, or feel disorientated in spaces such as this, I argue that protected funding and the application of

radical hospitality can help welcome people into a space. I expand on these ideas in Chapter 7, where I offer policy recommendations for combatting loneliness.

Next, I continue these ideas of embodied loneliness in the domestic sphere. Here, however, I draw on the ways structural inequalities are expressed and felt as loneliness.

6.2.2. Embodying structural inequalities in the domestic sphere

Adam's life story was introduced in Chapter 4 and, like Megan's story above, was drawn on to illustrate how a difficult spatial-temporal context had placed him in a state of stuckness (Hage, 2009), that trapped him in a state of perpetual state of loneliness. Here, this context remains ever present, but it is explored on the smallest, bodily scale. In this section I will draw on the ways that Adam expressed his feelings of loneliness as embodied. Like the other participant stories discussed in this section, there was an element of shrinking space and stretching time as loneliness manipulated his experience and negotiation of everyday life in the domestic sphere. Adam's life story did, however, powerfully highlight how painfully his temporal-spatial positioning was felt, and, in particular, how loneliness is embodied.

As Adam shared his life story, it was clear that he had very little control over even the basic decisions and functions of everyday life. In the following quotes, he draws on how his living situation is determined by the needs and wants of the rest of his household. The agency to leave and occupy his own space, and on his own terms, felt out of reach to Adam due to his complex mental and physical health needs, financial precarity, and the lack of suitable job opportunities in the local area.

"I have to share a room with my brother err so we always have to go to bed at the same time, which is problematic sometimes because he always likes to go to bed earlier – especially when he's got college – and sometimes I can't get to sleep until 1 or 2 in the morning...so I'm just lying in bed for a few hours just bored. A lot of that is just because I think a lot...it's really hard not to think. Especially when like you keep yourself busy all day and it gets to the point where you've got nothing to do – all you can do is think. That's why I don't get a lot of sleep."

"I'm home alone most of the time....and it's horrible. Erm I think it was a couple of months...well sometime last year my...pretty much my entire family were down in er...can't remember where it was now....but they were down south somewhere. My brother's in a lot of brass bands and stuff...one of the one's he was in was a competition down south. Erm anyway my parents went with him and they were down for a couple of days...so I got the house to myself for a couple of days and it's...at night it's horrible. I

mean most of the day it's not great but at night it's terrible. Especially because of the area we live in...it's....it's...somehow I was able to get to sleep."

As Adam shares a bedroom with his brother, he has no choice or way to pass time other than in silence and in the dark, while his brother sleeps. He is also unable to occupy other rooms within the home, as their house is small, and he has a difficult relationship with his dad, thus choosing to avoid him when possible. His time and space to sleep, rest, and relax are therefore structured by the choices of others. His inability to carve out time alone in the evening and wind down before bed, affects his sleep and all he "can do is think". There is a paradox here between the intense loneliness he feels, alongside the lack of solitude in the evening. This connects to my arguments made in Chapter 5, where I outline the tension and relationship between privacy, solitude and loneliness in the hometown (section 5.2). However, when he does have the house to himself, he is fearful, and finds it difficult to sleep and relax too. He shared with me that this was due to the high levels of crime in the street he lived, and he was anxious someone would break in.

Here I therefore suggest that this complex and embodied expression of loneliness relates to a lack of control over his environment and choices. A lack of solitude collides with involuntary physical isolation when his family are away, which is intensified by his lack of resources to leave home and gain a sense of economic independence. This echoes Megan's story, too, as her health restricts her ability to leave the house which is, again, out of her control. This lack of control speaks to the specific socio-economic geography of County Durham. Adam and Megan each have complex and specific life circumstances that make everyday life harder to navigate. However, the difficulty in accessing appropriate healthcare and support, as well as a limited and particular labour market that excludes Adam, means that their opportunities to gain control is limited. This links to literature exploring how austerity is affectively encountered, including paranoia (Hitchen, 2016), intense atmospheres (Raynor, 2016) and anticipation (Horton, 2016). Building on this, this research finds that loneliness is also embodied within the austerity landscape.

Further, I continue to conceptualise a relational geography of loneliness here. I argue that loneliness can (re)produce, shrink, expand and manipulate socio-spatial relationships. Further, my understanding of loneliness here is that it is a socio-spatial relationship to the self, others and the state. Therefore, as this section has outlined the ways loneliness can be

experienced through the embodiment of structural inequalities, I see a relational geography of loneliness as *taking up space* in the domestic sphere and on the embodied level. Further, I argue that this infiltrates relationships within the home. The relationship to, and with, the state is also internalised, and felt as loneliness on the embodied level. To summarise, I suggest that loneliness creates a space in itself, working across multiple scales, and absorbing the structural inequalities I see as intimately connected to these emotions. Within this relational geography of loneliness, the participants see their time stretched, space shrinking, and their everyday lives, emotions and relationships infiltrated by loneliness.

The final section of this chapter engages with the relationships that exist within the domestic sphere.

6.3. Feelings of (un)certainty: colliding norms and social relations in the domestic sphere

This section draws on the stories of Steven and Rachel¹². Their stories are united by compelling narratives of living alongside another generation – their parents – within the domestic sphere, and what this means in terms of their feelings of (dis)connection. Rachel, while now living alone, spoke in detail about her time living with her parents, having had periods of moving back and forth. She also spent a lot of time with them, and much of the interview was spent reflecting on the relationship she had with her parents, their views, expectations, and how this influenced her views around adulthood and personal relationships. Steven lives at home with his parents and, like Rachel, strongly reflected on the ways that the multigenerational home at times provided valuable support and care, whilst also being a space of friction and suffocation.

These reflections on the domestic space as being fractious when sharing with parents, related to the ways they felt their identities as adults should be, and how this collided with the expectations of the older generation. This builds on the youth transitions literature, by exploring how perceptions and expectations of adulthood – both generally and specifically to the context of County Durham – can filter down into the everyday experience of the domestic space, as well as within their personal, domestic relationships.

These multigenerational domestic spaces and relationships sit within the wider context of the changing socio-economic landscape of County Durham. The stark difference between the

¹² Steven is situated in Group 1 of the participant clusters (structural barriers and loneliness) and Rachel is situated in Group 4 (fractious relationships and loneliness).

everyday and economic realities for previous generations, in contrast to that of the millennial generation, was found to be a source of tension in this research. As outlined in Chapter 1, County Durham's economic landscape has faced dramatic change over the last forty to fifty years, and for the parents of the millennials in this research, was a tangible reality for them. Drawing back to the youth transitions literature outlined in Chapter 2, transitions to adulthood were previously understood in very linear terms, particularly as an individual progressed from school to the workplace. As a result, these transitions were socially situated and grounded in place, and areas like County Durham with dominant industries such as coal mining, saw adulthood and everyday life as standardised (Furlong, 2013; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Pollock, 2002; 2008; Valentine, 2003). County Durham's economic industries have since changed, and while the suggestion that the transition from school to work is a marker of adulthood has been critiqued (Cieslick and Pollock, 2002; Coles, 1995; France, 2007; Woodman and Bennett, 2015), there was a persistent rigidity in the way my participants understood adulthood. Further, a legacy of deindustrialisation paired with deep austerity cuts of over a decade, has meant that the socio-economic landscape is not only different compared to previous generations, but there is a lack of certainty.

This sense of (un)certainly also transferred to the expectations and norms around adulthood relationships. While marriage and having children were once considered key markers of adulthood, postmodern literature suggests that young people are now free to pursue "pure relationships" (Giddens, 1992) and carve out their own "choice biographies" (du Bois-Reymond, 1998). While this simplistic dualism has been widely critiqued for ignoring structural constraints, Macdonald and Shildrick (2018) found that the young working-class people in their study had similar aspirations and expectations of adulthood, compared to their middle-class counterparts. Therefore, despite the socio-economic background and context that a young person lives within, adulthood expectations aligned with neoliberal, individualistic values. Silva (2013: 59) found that working class young people were "trapped between the rigidity of the past and the flexibility of the present". I will therefore build on this idea to help highlight the clashing norms and expectations between generations.

These ideas around (un)certainly connect to the wider argument of this thesis, that loneliness is not only unsettling and disruptive, but it can also emerge in these spaces of insecurity and uncertainty. This section will therefore approach this idea of (un)certainly regarding adulthood and relationships, and how this differs across and between generations

within the same domestic space. These clashing ideas can thus foster tension, with loneliness being felt because of these tense relationships within the home.

First, I turn to Steven's story, who I introduced in Chapter 5.

Steven is 20 and from a rural town in County Durham. He currently lives with his dad, stepmam and siblings. He had previously got on well with his family, but a recent fall out meant he refused to speak to any of his family members in the household. Whenever he was home, he spent all of his time in his bedroom, refusing to speak to or share meals with his family. His mam lived in another town 30 miles away, and he occasionally stayed with her at weekends. His relationship with his mam has been difficult since childhood, and there is a lot of friction between them. Steven therefore avoids spending time with all of his direct family. At the time of the interview he was just finishing an IT apprenticeship and beginning the process of looking for a new job. He had really enjoyed his apprenticeship and spent a lot of his free time studying and attempting to improve his skills to gain a career in IT. Steven got on well with his colleagues, but did not socialise with them outside of work, preferring to keep his work and personal life separate. He does have some friends, but he shared that years of trust issues and feeling as though he does not "fit in" made it difficult for him to spend time with them. At weekends, when he is not working, he spends the days alone, filling his time by preparing packed lunches for his working week, cleaning his car, and studying. His life therefore currently revolves around his apprenticeship, and he was worried about the prospect of filling his time once the apprenticeship was finished.

Steven recognised that he had felt lonely "probably since primary school" and attributed this to the complicated relationship he had with his mam, where social workers had to become involved. This had resulted in years of mistrusting people and choosing to spend increased time alone rather than with other people. Steven also shared that he continuously felt like he was "doing" adulthood incorrectly because he did not drink alcohol or have a partner. While his friends accepted his choice not to drink alcohol, he still felt isolated due to the pervasive drinking culture he saw as commonplace in the area he lived (explored in Chapter 5), and with the friends he had.

These feelings of being *other* were exacerbated by frequent comments from his mam that he "should have a girlfriend" or that "he should be out drinking like other young people his age". In Chapter 5, I drew on how the culture, or imagined culture, of an area can result in feelings

of disorientation and loneliness in an individual's hometown. Here, this feeling of difference is further reinforced by his familial relationships and expectation of what and how he should be spending his time and navigating his relationships. As a result, he avoided staying at his mam's, as when he was there he felt isolated and judged as different or unusual for the way he conducted his everyday life and relationships. This feeds into ideas around adulthood, everyday life and relationships, and the collision between Steven's familial expectations and his own reality. In this space between projected norms and his everyday reality, Steven expressed how lonely and out of place this made him feel.

His feelings had, however, significantly increased recently, following a fall out with the family he lived with – his dad, stepmam, and three siblings. While he did not go into detail about what this argument was about, he shared that they had broken his trust and that he had decided to stop talking to them, spend any time with them, or share family meals. He was quite resolute in his tone and seemed accepting of completely disassociating with the family he lived with. Despite this, he was reflective on how this affected his navigation of the domestic space.

While he shared that he had never had a deep, meaningful relationship with the family he lived with, he did reflect on how he missed playfully teasing his younger sisters, chat "rubbish" with his dad, or join in on family meals. He told me that they had tried talking to him, but he only gave monosyllabic answers or ignored them completely. As a result, similarly to those discussed earlier in the chapter, he saw his space shrinking and time stretching. In Steven's case, this was a result of the ways his familial relationships had been put under strain, effectively isolating him within the home. He exclusively spent time in his bedroom, and his evenings and weekends centred on his time spent outside of the domestic space – preparing for his working week. In cleaning his car, studying, and shopping, planning, and preparing packed lunches, it was as if he was using the time-space of the home on evenings and weekends as an anticipatory time-space, that mentally removed him from the here and now of the domestic space with his family.

This builds on existing literature that finds that the emotion of anticipation can be more wearing and exhausting than the event itself (Horton, 2016). Here, instead, Steven is using this anticipation as a mechanism to remove himself from the uncomfortable and lonely time-space of the domestic space and the difficult relationships it contains. In focusing solely on

the time-space of his working life, he attempts to avoid the isolation in his home life. As has been the theme in this chapter, Steven's personal relationships and emotions have saturated the domestic space, affecting the way he experiences space and time. However, in Steven's case, the relationships within the home were the catalyst for the presence of loneliness and the manipulation of time and space. This sense of loneliness emerging from familial relationships was shared by Rachel:

Rachel is 33 years old and works part time as a teacher and does some personal tutoring alongside. She had recently had to reapply for her job and her hours were changed from full time to part time, due to the school budget. While she acknowledged this would be a financial hit, she noted that this would be better for her mental health and she could spend more time doing the things she wanted to do. She has lived in County Durham all of her life, excluding the three years she spent at University, although this was also in the North East of England. She lives alone but has a close relationship with her parents and extended family who all live nearby and she sees regularly throughout the week. She has friends, but she tells me that she sometimes finds it hard to understand why they would want to spend time with her, and throughout our conversation she drew on how her low self-esteem and mental health make her feel very lonely at times. She told me that she likes to try and keep herself busy and get out of her flat as much as possible, as she has recognised that if she does not do this she isolates herself more and her mental health suffers.

At the time of the interview, Rachel was living alone, but she reflected on how she had moved back and forth to her parents' house following university and between jobs. She spoke at length about her relationship with her parents and how she felt they viewed her life.

"I feel like...erm...because a lot of my family are from a certain generation when houses were cheap, when you stay in a job for life...I'm still around that. My mam and dad are 62/63, so my dad worked for ICI for about 40 years before he retired and it's like...even if he doesn't say anything or doesn't intend to...like I applied for 25 jobs in the summer and like struggled to get an interview, and I feel like he's thinking why? What are you doing wrong? Type of thing. And that's just the way it is now. I think erm...so like....yeah....the get up and get a job type of thing is harder...like you can't get a mortgage – I know I've managed it – but with help from them and my nana as well – but I think there's that expectation there, especially from a group in society, that you should be able to..."

The above quote reveals a tension between her and her dad, and her feeling that he does not understand the economic challenges her generation faces. While she remains very close with her dad, and sees or speaks to him every day, there is a theme of not being good enough that runs throughout her life story. She tells me that her parents have never said anything about her previous struggle to secure employment, and have always been both financially and emotionally supportive of her, yet she feels the weight of the stark contrast in their generational circumstances. She goes on to connect this with how there is also a generational difference in terms of how relationships are navigated:

“...society has become a lot more throwaway I think. So like...so like material things but also like, relationships with people...I think...like I think it’s really hard for people to say sorry and stuff, because of...well it’s like I can just get something else, or someone else, or...like...they just yeah...I dunno...I just feel like that reflects a lot the way society goes on...it’s not worth it to look after something, and obviously, erm....so things like relationships where it’s...it’s now easier to get out of toxic relationships...you think...well I think has that gone too far? So like...maybe people don’t work at it enough. So I look at my mum and dad, who’ve been married for 38 years, and, erm, they’re lovely...but they’re...they’re from a certain generation where my dad is my dad and is the head of the house, and my mum is not liking it at the minute. So my dad’s first instinct is one way, and then my mum says no, so then they end up arguing about it. And they always make up and it’s always fine, but because it’s my dad’s first instinct that he’s right and he’s the head and, erm, so...but I think I look at people in relationships at my age and think...if they got into a situation like that, would they be able to sustain that? Or would it just...and I know there’s reasons why relationships end, and there’s reasons why relationships should end because they’re not good...but....just the throwaway culture...this may be a bit deep but I always think if there was World War Three, the same way there was World War Two, how would society...we wouldn’t be able to pull together, we wouldn’t be able to make do and mend, we wouldn’t be able to survive rationing...I think that’s the culture we are in”

What is striking in Rachel’s comments regarding relationships and the generational difference is that she acknowledges the difficulties her mam faces in her marriage, but values her mam’s continued commitment despite “not liking it at the minute.” In referring to her dad as “head of the household” she also connects with patriarchal ideas of family structure and domestic life. While this lack of agency and patriarchal hierarchy can be said to add to the burden of isolating and suffocating reproductive labour that Eve and Abbie undertake in their households, Rachel views similar patriarchy in her parent’s relationship in positive terms. Her

direct comparison to how her generation would “give up” on relationships like this speaks to a value judgement that she is making on the level of commitment she sees her generation making. She reflects that this affects her ability to pursue relationships, both romantic and platonic, as she cannot understand why they would want to spend time with her. While she notes this is connected to her low self-esteem, there is also an element of mistrust that people will not commit in the same way she sees her parents’ generation did. Here I therefore suggest that Rachel sees a clear division in relationship norms whereby she is almost mourning a sense of certainty that ‘traditional’ attitudes to relationships would have provided.

Drawing back to the youth transitions literature and expectations of adulthood relationships, there is a shift from standardised, linear pathways to adulthood which included heteronormative expectations of marriage and children, towards “pure relationships” (Giddens, 1992), and the fluid, flexible pursuit of connections that were free from norms and expectations. While this is a very black and white understanding of relationships, which ignores close knit ties, interdependencies, attachments, family dynamics, and cultures, Rachel appears to have aligned her understanding with the concept that relationships are only pursued for personal gain and as part of a “life project” (France, 2007). Even though she is critical of her dad at times, particularly in his lack of understanding regarding the changing economic market, there is a sense that her parent’s relationship, despite its rigid patriarchal norms, is certain and thus comforting.

This feeling of certainty can be understood in both spatial and temporal terms. I build on Walkerdine’s (2010) work on the closure of steelworks in a North Wales town, which bound the community together and produced a sense of certainty of community that was both spatially bounded and temporal. Rachel’s understanding of place, relationships and adulthood is bound to the spatial-temporal certainty of the past, which she finds comforting like those in Walkerdine’s (2010) study. What is new here is this sense of spatial-temporal (un)certainly when considering the geographies of loneliness.

Being certain also suggests a linearity, an understanding of what is to come in the future. Rather than anticipating (Horton, 2016) what may – or may not – happen, there is a privilege to knowing or being prepared for what comes *next*. This connects to Olson’s (2015) work on geographies of urgency and waiting, and how temporal movement, progression or a

resolution is dependent on *who matters* in society. Further, Senanyake and King's (2021) paper on geographies of certainty notes that (un)certainty is unevenly and differentially experienced, and is relational to socio-economic status. Here, I build on this by suggesting there is a spatial element, and that feeling (un)certain can also speak to how an individual feels situated in their everyday life. Drawing back to Ahmed's (2006) theory on (dis)orientation, I suggest that feeling (un)certain can also affect how an individual moves through, and in, space. In Rachel's uncertainty surrounding economic stability and, in particular, relationships, this feeds into her sense of self and self-worth, inhibiting her from feeling able, or inclined, to build meaningful connections with others. There is an element of there being a lack of control in being able to manage the uncertain 'rules' and expectations of relationships of her generation.

This lack of control links to the wider argument of the thesis, that feeling disrupted, unsettled, uncertain, can accentuate feelings of loneliness. This uncertainty is expressed in this section as relating to colliding generational norms, which filter down and affect personal relationships and imaginaries of adulthood. A sense of being different, or uncertain about what the future holds and what to expect, has affected the everyday life and sense of self for Steven and Rachel. Loneliness is thus felt on the intimate, embodied scale as it disrupts how one feels about themselves and their ability to connect with others.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter has approached loneliness at the intimate scale. I understand this as within the domestic sphere, the relationships, and as embodied. I have tied together, and built on, the politics and geographies of home, and geographies of austerity and everyday life. I have done this by applying my conceptual framework that utilises emotional and embodied geographies. In this chapter I have continued to spatialise and politicise the topic of loneliness, as I outline the ways socioeconomic inequalities and societal norms can be *felt*, embodied, and experienced as loneliness. In this chapter I have also continued to tease out some policy recommendations for tackling loneliness, which I flesh out in the next chapter, Chapter 7.

I have explored this scale in three parts. 6.1 utilises my concept of crunch points to examine the particular time-spaces that are imbued with connection, family and domestic norms. I argue that occupying these spaces can, for some, make way for acute feelings of loneliness.

Here, I continue to utilise the concepts of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Hitchen, 2020) and disorientation (Ahmed, 2006) to make sense of the diverse experiences of loneliness that emerge from the intimate lived experiences of County Durham millennials.

6.2 explores the ways loneliness can manipulate time-spaces, building on Anderson's (2009) assertion that boredom can slow space and still time. Here, I suggest loneliness stretches time and shrinks space. I argue this is the case particularly in the domestic sphere. I explore this concept by examining the ways gender inequalities and economic structural inequalities can affect the experience of time-spaces, and lead to feelings of loneliness. I also consider how loneliness affects time-spaces, too. I close this section by continuing to draw on my concept of a relational geography of loneliness, and what this means for the participants' relationship to the self, others, and the state.

Section 6.3 highlights how complex relationships within the domestic sphere can relate to loneliness on the intimate scale. In particular I explore the role of (un)certainty, and the spatialities and temporalities of this. This has helped me flesh out the ways relationships, norms, and intergenerational connections in the domestic sphere can speak to geographies of loneliness.

Overall, in this chapter, I have continued to weave the common thread that has been worked throughout this thesis. I argue that loneliness can emerge from feeling unsettled, disrupted, and unsupported. I link these feelings to the wider spatial-temporal positioning of County Durham millennials, and outline the ways this socio-economic context, along with neoliberal norms of adulthood, relationships and emotion, can contribute to these uncertain feelings. I therefore argue that loneliness is political, and that geography matters when considering who, where, why, and how someone feels lonely.

The next chapter concludes this thesis. Here, I tie together each of the chapters, and outline what this multi-scalar study of loneliness has contributed to geography. I answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, and make recommendations for further research. I also make policy recommendations for tackling loneliness, which I have begun to unravel within these empirical and analytical chapters.

Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter draws this thesis to a close. In this thesis I have critically explored the issue of loneliness, and highlighted it through the experience of millennials in County Durham. This socio-spatial view of loneliness is the first of its kind. I have uniquely used my own conceptual framework, taking a feminist, phenomenological, and relational perspective. This has given me the tools to understand loneliness from those who have experienced it first-hand. The County Durham millennials in this research are thus the experts in their own narratives of loneliness. The multi-scalar approach I have taken here has also enabled me to unravel the multiple layers that speak to, and are part of, loneliness. I have spatialised and politicised the topic of loneliness, which has mostly been absent in conversations and research on loneliness. In pulling together literatures on youth transitions, relationships, place, and neoliberal adulthood, I have innovatively drawn out the ways in which loneliness is uniquely experienced within the spatial-temporal positioning of millennials in County Durham. I have argued that loneliness *unsettles* and *disrupts* a sense of security. It affects the sense of self, an ability to connect, and the feeling of being cared for. Further, I argue that it works both ways. An unsettling set of circumstances can also be fertile ground for loneliness to persist. This intimate relationship thus makes loneliness hard to name, navigate, and approach. This thesis has thus begun to tease out, and shine a light on, the everyday life and geographies of loneliness.

This chapter is divided into 5 parts. Section 7.1 ties the empirical chapters together. This forms the main discussion element of the chapter. I explore how the multi-scalar approach in this thesis has helped gain fresh understanding of loneliness. I bring the three empirical chapters into conversation with one another, exploring the scales, sites, complexities, and contradictions of loneliness. I also revisit the research questions that I outlined in Chapter 1. 7.2 outlines the contributions of this research. I provide five key areas that I see this research as contributing to both the understanding of loneliness, as well as social geography and geographies of loneliness. Section 7.3 is where I offer some policy recommendations. I have hinted at these throughout the thesis, but here I flesh out my recommendations in greater detail. In section 7.4 I make some recommendations for further research. I finally close this thesis with a short conclusion in section 7.5.

7.1. Tying the empirical chapters together

This section forms the discussion part of this thesis. I highlight the ways Chapters 4, 5, and 6 speak to one another, giving a multi-scalar account of millennial loneliness in County Durham. To do this, I return to the research questions, and examine how all three analytical chapters answer these questions. First of all, I have included a reminder of the research aims that I set out in Chapter 1.

- Take a critical generational approach to explore the context millennials have grown up and live within, shaping their everyday relationships and connections
- Use geographies of emotion, relationships and everyday life to understand millennial loneliness
- Use a feminist, phenomenological and relational theoretical framework to understand how identities, spaces and experiences are formed through interactions with others, and influence incidence of loneliness
- Interrogate the neoliberal understanding of adulthood and how individualised ideas of transitions to adulthood play out when considering loneliness

Each of these aims have been achieved across the entirety of this thesis. I have been critical of the temporal positioning of the millennial generation, arguing that they are uniquely placed within a set of circumstances that makes loneliness likely to emerge. Further, I have continuously returned to the concepts of everyday life, emotion, and relationships, to unpick the experiences of loneliness. This has helped deepen our understanding of the geographies of loneliness. I have interrogated neoliberal conceptualisations of adulthood, and sought to highlight the ways adulthood milestones coincide with incidence of loneliness. Finally, I have achieved this with the application of my feminist, phenomenological, and relational framework. In valuing the lived experiences, subjectivities, situated knowledges, and interdependencies of my participants in their multi-scalar contexts, I have fleshed out the realities of millennial loneliness in County Durham. These aims have helped me answer my research questions.

I will now take each research question in turn, and demonstrate how the three analytical chapters relate to one another, and have deepened understanding of loneliness.

7.1.1. *How do millennials live through and experience loneliness in a neoliberal society?*

This thesis has addressed the ways the millennial generation experiences loneliness within a neoliberal society. I have demonstrated this on multiple scales, from the macro to the intimate. I have consistently argued in this thesis that the specific temporalities of the millennial generation, alongside heavily ingrained neoliberal norms and expectations around relationships, everyday life, and emotion, combine to produce fertile conditions for loneliness to emerge. This argument has been woven throughout the three empirical chapters. In this section, I draw on how this research question has been answered in a multitude of ways, and take each chapter in turn to summarise how I have answered the research question, as well as woven a consistent narrative throughout the thesis.

In Chapter 4, I outlined how the social and cultural value of time spoke to the temporalities of adulthood. I identified the ways that adulthood was *expected* to be navigated, with norms around careers, aspirations, family life, and romantic relationships, expected to be achieved at specific time across the lifecourse (Wanka, 2010). When this did not happen, I argued that participants felt their biographies to be disrupted. These biographical disruptions resulted in feeling *less than*, which connected to their feelings of loneliness. This chapter took a macro level look at the ways overarching neoliberal norms and expectations spoke to ideas of adulthood. As I have already highlighted, at the time of writing this thesis, millennials are considered young adults. This chapter therefore addresses the research question by critically exploring the temporalities of adulthood and the lifecourse. This enabled me to argue that loneliness is intimately tied to the temporal positioning of the millennial generation, and can be exacerbated by the societal norms that are attributed to neoliberal society.

I scaled this down in Chapter 5. In this chapter I addressed the research question in the context of living in County Durham. I drew on how the social and cultural expectations of adulthood were influencing the lives of individuals living in a place that is culturally isolated. I examined the ways that the imagined geographies of County Durham affected the relationship participants had with themselves, others, and the wider area. I argued that these place-specific norms and the cultural identity of County Durham sometimes collided with the overarching neoliberal norms and expectations of adulthood I outlined in Chapter 2. This, I argued, saw personal loneliness emerge from an isolation in an area that is already culturally isolated. I therefore approached this research question by examining the ways imagined geographies of place coincided with neoliberal portrayals of adulthood,

relationships, and emotion. This chapter thus spoke to Chapter 5 by zooming in on the ways neoliberal societal norms and the millennial generation, could be further affected by an additional layer of place-specific norms.

In Chapter 6 I scaled down further to the intimate scale. This chapter addressed norms and expectations around living arrangements, intergenerational relationships, and the politics of home. I argued that there was a friction between the expectations millennials felt they were held to, and those that older generations in their personal communities subscribed to. Further, I drew on the concept of (un)certainty to unpick ideas around generations, society, and loneliness. I saw this as connecting to the changing socioeconomic landscape of County Durham, and the legacy of this for older generations in the county. This, combined with overarching sociocultural expectations of adulthood, everyday life, and relationships, could lead to fractious relationships. This friction sometimes led to an uncomfortable domestic life, and could lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Chapter 6 therefore continues my findings in Chapters 4 and 5, as I examine the ways expectations of adulthood coincide with feelings of loneliness.

The three chapters therefore speak to one another by revealing the multiple layers of loneliness in the context of neoliberal society and the millennial generation. I have answered this research question by acknowledging what I mean by neoliberal society, and the norms and expectations embedded within that. I have also addressed who millennials are, and the ways expectations of adulthood, everyday life, emotions, and relationships filter down and affect experiences of loneliness. This has been done from the macro level, through to the intimate scale. A theme of being *out-of-sync* has summarised this research question across Chapters 4, 5, 6. This, I have argued, leads to feelings of loneliness.

7.1.2. How does living in County Durham shape the experience of loneliness?

This thesis has contributed to the understanding of loneliness as a geographical issue. I have done this by exploring loneliness in the context of County Durham. By politicising and spatialising the topic, I have argued that the unique social, economic, and political context of County Durham can lead to feelings of loneliness. I have outlined this in relation to the structural inequalities and vulnerabilities that connect to an area with a history of deindustrialisation, disinvestment from central government, and uneven austerity cuts. This

has been the backdrop to the rich narratives of loneliness I have collected for this thesis. Chapters 4, 5, 6 all develop on this argument, from multiple scales.

Chapter 4 approached this research question from the macro scale. I argued that the biographical disruptions that I connected to loneliness, were shaped by living in County Durham. I argued that financial insecurity, difficulty in accessing appropriate housing, a lack of suitable employment, and unmet health care needs, all prevented some of the participants from *moving forward* with their lives. These aspects are connected to the uneven landscape in which County Durham is situated within. Further, I found that these feelings of being *paused* resulted in feelings of loneliness.

Chapter 5 built on this and scaled down to understand loneliness from the scale of the hometown. The imagined geographies of County Durham spoke to the intimate expressions of loneliness. Feelings of disorientation, othering, and exclusion all emerged in my discussion and analysis in Chapter 5. I drew on the ways the North East of England, and County Durham more specifically, had been situated as *other* in relation to the UK. When this was internalised by participants, I found that there was a sense of being isolated in a place that was isolated in itself. This chapter therefore built on my findings in Chapter 4, by engaging with the cultural context and representations of the county, and how this related to feelings of loneliness.

Finally, Chapter 6 highlighted the ways the broader conditions of County Durham could be embodied and expressed as loneliness. In particular, I outlined how structural inequalities were embodied and felt as loneliness. I explored this through the life story of Adam, whose inability to move out of the family home meant he had little autonomy over his everyday life. This related to making decisions about what time he went to sleep, when he ate, and how he relaxed. This lack of solitude linked to feelings of loneliness. His inability to afford his own living space was directly linked to the limited opportunities he had access to. This outlines how County Durham shapes the experience of loneliness on the intimate scale.

To conclude, County Durham has shaped the experience of loneliness as a result of its unique geographical context. Fewer job opportunities, increased austerity cuts, extended healthcare waiting lists, the closure of community spaces and groups. All of these macro scale actions have shaped the intimate and deeply personal experiences of loneliness. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 all argue this at different levels. The uniting theme across all three chapters was that

loneliness persisted in spaces where participants felt *less than, insecure, unsupported, and uncared for*. This, I argue, is uniquely tied to living in County Durham.

Approaching loneliness from multiple scales has helped me to break down and understand the socio-spatial conditions of loneliness. This has provided scope for the policy recommendations I make in section 7.3. Next, however, I turn to the contributions this thesis has made in section 7.2.

7.2. The contributions of this research

In this section I tease out five key areas which form my main arguments of this thesis. These contributions not only add to the limited social geographical understanding of loneliness, but they also help develop understanding of loneliness more generally. Each sub-section below relates to the five contributions I wish to outline here. These contributions are arguments, concepts, and ideas that cut across the entirety of the thesis and analytical chapters. They are therefore my *headline* arguments that have emerged from my reading, data collection, reflections, and analysis. They are the arguments that have been simmering away since the start of this project in 2017.

7.2.1. *Geography matters: loneliness is a spatial and political issue*

I stated in Chapter 1 that while loneliness has started to become more of a part of the everyday consciousness and vernacular, it is distinctly apolitical. Claims that *anyone* can be lonely at *anytime* gloss over the very real structural inequalities and uneven landscape that I argue contributes to feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is therefore both a spatial and a political issue.

The context of County Durham has helped highlight the broader scale in which loneliness can be encountered and provoked. The socioeconomic and political landscape of County Durham has meant that those who live there are faced with limited opportunities, job insecurity, and long healthcare waiting lists. All of which have been endured by the participants in this study. As I have clarified throughout, this thesis is not designed to be a deterministic account of living in County Durham. I am not suggesting that by living in County Durham, one will always experience these insecurities and inequalities. I am, however, arguing that the conditions which are linked to an uneven socioeconomic environment, such as that of County Durham, are likely to encourage feelings of loneliness.

By understanding loneliness as spatial and political, it gives the opportunity to identify those who are at a heightened risk of loneliness. It also helps prevent it. I expand on this more in Section 7.4. This research has therefore added to literature on the politics of loneliness (Batsleer and Duggan, 2021; Stenning and Hall, 2018). This thesis is, however, the first to take such a detailed, focused, qualitative, and rich look at loneliness, which argues that loneliness is intimately tied to the geographical positioning of an individual. As I have demonstrated with this thesis, loneliness is a multi-scalar and multi-sited issue. Geography therefore matters to the issue of loneliness. The socioeconomic and political landscape in which a person sits can play an integral role in their feelings of loneliness or connection.

7.2.2. A relational geography of loneliness

This thesis has seen me introduce my own concept of a relational geography of loneliness. I was inspired by Hall's (2019) understanding of everyday life as not place-bound, using the relational geographies of family, friendships, and intimacies as conceptualising the everyday geographies of austerity. I have built on this here by exploring what happens to space when there are no relationships, or relationships have changed, or there is a desire for a relationship when there is none. Further, this idea of a relationship extends beyond the personal, and encompasses relationships to the self, others, and the state. In this thesis I have explored how space is made, manipulated, stretched, shrunk and (re)produced by the presence of loneliness in an individual's everyday life.

I have argued that loneliness can create a space in itself, working across multiple scales, and absorbing structural inequalities. This can have the effect of infiltrating the everyday lives, emotions, and relationships of an individual. Loneliness therefore takes up space and can manipulate socio-spatial relationships. Loneliness can thus produce a space that feels exclusionary and (dis)orientating.

By using this concept I have centred the role of relationships – or lack of – and argued for an understanding of loneliness that acknowledges its relational impact on the spatialities and temporalities of everyday life. This has not only helped deepen understanding of loneliness, it has contributed to geographical knowledge. I have added to the currently limited geographies of loneliness discipline, while also speaking to, and supporting, existing understanding of emotional geographies and space.

7.2.3. The crunch points of loneliness: living and feeling structural inequalities

I have also offered the concept of crunch points in this thesis. I build on Thomson et al.'s (2008) concept of critical moments. Critical moments refer to how an individual's resources can alter how challenging circumstances are responded to, overcome, or processed. The concept of crunch points also acknowledges this, but it also considers the internalisation of the norms and expectations of neoliberal adulthood. Further, crunch points explore the ways in which time-spaces absorb meaning, particularly in relation to norms surrounding heteronormativity, family, and domestic life. Crunch points have a temporality to them too. When biographies feel disrupted, the crunch points of an individual's lifeworld can alter how one's lifecourse is paused, redirected, or moved through.

The concept of crunch points has contributed in two ways. First of all, it helps identify the time-spaces that allow a relational geography of loneliness to develop. This aids understanding and deepens our knowledge of loneliness. Secondly, it enhances geographic knowledge by outlining the ways in which structural inequalities, neoliberal norms, and sociocultural expectations can become embedded in time-spaces and influences an individual's relationship to the self, others, and the state. This contributes to emotional geographies scholarship.

7.2.4. The (dis)orientation of loneliness

I have found it useful in this thesis to use Sara Ahmed's (2006) theoretical language of (dis)orientation. This has helped me make sense of the geographies of loneliness, unpicking the spatialities and temporalities of who, where, and why someone feels lonely. I understood (dis)orientation as multi-layered and multi-scalar. I have argued that the participants in this research have felt disorientated when feeling out-of-sync with the neoliberal norms of everyday life, heteronormative relationship expectations, the imagined culture of where they live, within their personal communities, and in terms of their own self-identity and personal lifeworld. Further, I argue that feeling disorientated is intimately connected to incidence of loneliness.

This has been a useful contribution in two ways. Firstly, it helps identify how factors that speak to disorientation and loneliness are so deeply embedded in the languages we use, expectations we have, the questions we ask, and the relationships we navigate. While it is so socially and culturally ingrained, and thus complex to change, it is also important to

acknowledge. By acknowledging the acts of everyday life that can lead to someone feeling disorientated, and lonely, it helps broaden understanding of the ways to prevent alienating and exclusionary attitudes than connect to incidence of loneliness. Further, I have added to scholarly understanding of how Ahmed's (2006) theory of (dis)orientation can be applied to geographic inquiry on everyday life, emotions, and relationships. This has helped me in my pursuit of taking a feminist, phenomenological, and relational approach to the study of loneliness. This has, in turn, deepened knowledge of the geographies of loneliness, by identifying the spatialities and politics of the issue.

7.2.5. Feeling connected and cared for by the states supports personal wellbeing and connection

My fifth core argument of this thesis is that feeling care and support from a state level can help towards personal wellbeing and connection. For some of the participants in this research, there was a sense that they felt like a number. Long waiting lists to receive appropriate healthcare, a lack of employment opportunities, and poor housing options, all contributed to feeling like they had been forgotten and uncared for. This, in turn, left some of the participants feeling despondent and worthless. I have argued that this can result in a biography feeling disrupted, and that access to basic aspects of a comfortable and healthy life are unreachable for some of the respondents in this study. Further, I argue that this set of conditions can lead to feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness is therefore difficult to tackle without the support and structural change from central government. I have found that without the due care from institutions, and the subsequent impact this has on health, wellbeing, and feelings of security, that the motivation to connect with others and prioritise interpersonal relationships is placed on the backburner. My underlying argument of this thesis is that loneliness is political. To tackle loneliness, real, structural change needs to be taken seriously.

This argument contributes in two ways. Firstly, it adds to understanding about loneliness, and how it, as an issue, can be approached. I expand on this further in the following section on policy recommendations. Secondly, it adds to existing scholarship on austerity and everyday life (Hall, 2016; 2017; 2019; 2021; Hitchen, 2016; Horton, 2016; Horton et al., 2021; Jupp, 2017; Kiely, 2021; Stenning, 2018; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2019). I argue that

loneliness is embedded in the austerity landscape. This supports, and builds on, arguments made by Stenning and Hall (2018).

7.3. Policy recommendations

This section makes some policy recommendations based on the findings of this research. It is hoped that this work can be used to make active change to the feelings of connection, care, and community in the everyday lives of those feeling lonely. First of all, based on the above contributions, it goes without saying that meaningful, structural change needs to be made in order to prevent feelings of loneliness. This research has demonstrated the ways decisions and actions on the macro scale, can filter down and affect the intimate, everyday lives of individuals. I therefore start this section by arguing that financial cuts to social infrastructure, alongside rising living costs, and the reverberations and impact of Covid-19, all provide fertile ground for loneliness to emerge and endure. I thus argue that redirecting funding towards healthcare, affordable housing, affordable food and living costs, and community, arts, and cultural spaces where individuals can just *be*, are all crucial steps in preventing loneliness. While this may seem an obvious, and ambitious, policy recommendation, I felt it was important to document. The responsibility for facilitating connection, and preventing loneliness, should lie with the government. As I argued in section 7.3, loneliness is a political and a spatial issue. The care for personal wellbeing can also only be taken when basic living standards and wellbeing are taken care of first. My first recommendation is to therefore direct funding towards the above services and facilities, particularly in areas such as County Durham, where an uneven landscape has meant loneliness persists.

This leads on to my second policy recommendation that there needs to be geographically-informed action plans when addressing the issue of loneliness. This thesis has been a multi-scalar account of the ways loneliness is insidiously woven into the socioeconomic and political context of County Durham. While the vulnerabilities and structural inequalities that speak to loneliness in this context could be applied to other areas across the country that face similar issues, the unique geography of an area is important to understand when attempting to tackle feelings of loneliness. In many ways this thesis has presented an entry point into conversations about geographies of loneliness. I therefore suggest that in order to efficiently understand loneliness, and prevent it, work needs to be tailored to specific geographic areas. This not only involves a top level understanding of the socioeconomic context and quantitative statistics. As this research has shown, gaining intimate insight into

the everyday realities of loneliness is important to not only understanding the issue, but identifying the ways it can be prevented. My second recommendation is to therefore ensure a spatial understanding of loneliness.

A breakdown of close-knit communities has been charged with promoting increasing rates of loneliness (Putman, 2000). As I outlined in Chapter 5, I do not agree with this. My findings suggest that some versions of close-knit communities persist, which can have *reorientating* effects, pushing back against feelings of loneliness. Such tight, all-knowing communities can also have a suffocating effect, which increases feelings of loneliness. Feelings of community are thus complex. From a policy perspective, I think it is crucial to embrace this idea. By asking what community *means*, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all conceptualisation of community, a more thorough understanding of tackling loneliness can be aided. I therefore argue, and suggest, that for real policy change to be employed, an everyday, and geographically-sensitive, understanding of community needs to be applied. While there will never be a consensus on this, traditional understandings of close-knit communities need to be challenged and updated. This thesis has begun to unpick this. I therefore argue for a continuation of this, and for policy makers to acknowledge how community is understood when encouraging connection and tackling loneliness.

My final policy recommendation connects to the hopeful geographies literature (Castree et al., 2010 Cloke et al., 2000). I drew on these ideas in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4 I highlighted how spaces in the community could facilitate care, kindness, and connection. Most importantly, these spaces were facilitated by individuals who showed genuine concern and support. These spaces made a real difference to people like Megan in this research. While they are no substitute for real, structural change, embracing these spaces as important features on an uneven landscape, can be a source of hope and material change.

In a research role I held alongside my PhD, I worked with Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art on a project called *20 babies*, exploring the effects of the pandemic on families who had a baby during lockdown. One of my key findings was that the social connections built among the participants in the year-long project were one of the more meaningful things to emerge. This community supported, cared, and held each other in the space, as they shared their, often challenging, experiences (Kelly, 2022). I argued that this was facilitated by the radical hospitality (Pratt, 2011) shown from the staff, as they ensured the space felt welcoming,

supportive, inclusive, and respectful. This, along with the findings from this PhD research, has helped shape my final policy recommendation.

As I highlighted in Chapter 6, spaces, like parent and baby groups, are not always suited to individuals seeking to make connections. Abbie spoke about how she found these spaces cliquy and unwelcoming. This increased her feelings of loneliness, as she continued to isolate herself. This is something I heard across the project as I collected my data. This is also what I saw as unique in the 20 babies project at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. By actively and intentionally inscribing radical hospitality values into their project design, the group was able to encourage connection, friendship, and support. I therefore suggest that in order to prevent feelings of loneliness, a radical hospitality policy *tool-kit* could be employed. Securing funding for at least one year achieves a sense of stability for a group. Further, ensuring all staff who facilitate group sessions are welcoming to all participants. This can be small. Remembering people's drink orders, asking after family members, showing an active interest in their everyday lives, ensuring they know how to confidently use and access the space they meet in regularly. All of these things can make a difference to people who lack confidence in seeking connection in the community. A tool-kit incorporating these ideas, which needs to be credited to those at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, would, I argue, help tackle feelings of loneliness. This could be applied in multiple sites and spaces, and be tailored to the specific area, group, and individuals.

To close this section, I have included a brief summary of my policy recommendations below:

- Government funding needs to be invested in social infrastructure. Providing basic health and living standards is critical to preventing feelings of loneliness.
- Geographically-sensitive action plans are needed when tackling loneliness. Taking account of the social, economic, and political context, structural inequalities, and unique socio-cultural conditions are all vital in not only understanding loneliness, but tackling it too.
- The meaning of the term community needs to be updated. Speaking directly to local people and scoping out their understanding of community is crucial to building one. This will aid connection and push back against feelings of loneliness. A one-size-fits-all concept of community does not work. Qualitative work therefore needs to be done to understand geographically-informed ideas of community.

- A radical hospitality tool-kit should be formed, and adapted, to meet the needs of specific community groups. By inscribing the core values of inclusivity, openness, respect, friendliness, care, and support, a wider range of people can be made to feel welcome in a varied range of groups in their local area. This will encourage connection for those who, for whatever reason, have felt uncomfortable reaching out and joining clubs and groups.

7.4. Recommendations for future research

In this section I make recommendations for future research. While I would argue that Covid-19 would act as yet another layer to the difficult circumstances contributing to loneliness, I think it would be valuable to gain a thorough understanding of how Covid-19 and loneliness coincide. Following months of government-issued physical isolation, reduced human contact, as well as the impact of stalled healthcare, and financial insecurity, this thesis can act as a foreshadowing of the ways loneliness is exacerbated by the impacts of Covid-19. However, as the data was collected prior to the pandemic, this can only be conjecture. I would therefore recommend that further research is carried out on the connection between Covid-19, its associated restrictions, its long-lasting and reverberating effects, and loneliness.

As I learnt during this research, and I outlined in Chapter 3, the recruitment strategy was one of the more challenging aspects of this PhD. Further, I sometimes felt uncomfortable with the circumstances of usually meeting the participant once, and rarely hearing from them again. While in some ways this suited the participants, with several sharing that they felt more able to talk to me as they knew they would not see me again, and that it was cathartic to share their story, it felt strange to learn so much about them, and have no follow up interview or contact. When I began collecting my data, I had originally thought I would arrange second interviews with some of the participants following my maternity leave. However, after extending my leave for longer than I had originally planned, and returning during pandemic restrictions, I chose not to do this. I believe with the data I have collected I have been able to gain a rich understanding of the geographies of loneliness. However, to further our understanding of loneliness, I would propose a research project that is longitudinal and works with a smaller cohort of participants. I see this as furthering academic knowledge, as well as having policy relevance, as it is a chance to gain a longer-term understanding of the everyday realities of loneliness. While I believe I achieved this through my application of the

life story method, the opportunity to work with a smaller group of participants, over a longer period of time, would build on the learning gained from this PhD research.

As I outlined in Chapter 3, there were also multiple people I spoke to about loneliness that, for whatever reason, did not meet for a formal interview. Less than 50% of those who contacted me resulted in a research interview. While I gained a lot of knowledge from my conversations with these people, I was not able to ethically record them here in this thesis. I would therefore argue that the traditional interview format may not be suited to everyone when sharing their emotions, experiences, and personal life stories, particularly when it relates to loneliness. I would therefore like to see future research adopt more creative methods. The relationship diaries worked well in this research, but asking participants to keep more detailed, longer-term, diaries, could help participants record their accounts of everyday life, emotions, and relationships. This would help flesh out understanding of loneliness by hearing the voices of individuals who would otherwise avoid an interview or traditional research setting.

Further, my work as a research assistant at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, was my first experience of using art to help participants express their, often difficult, experiences. The use of collages, mood boards, zines, scrapbooks, paintings, poetry, and more, were all introduced to me in this researcher post. I could see how valuable they were for that project, and I would like to see the application of creative methods to the subject of loneliness. While this might put some people off, as Richardson (2015) found in his own work using creative methods to discuss masculine identities, I think there would be value in encouraging some individuals to express their reflections in different ways. I see the application of creative methods as adding to scholarship on the geographies of loneliness, as it could facilitate the expression and experiences of loneliness of a more diverse group of people. This will continue to flesh out understanding of loneliness from both an academic point of view, as well as a policy perspective.

As I wrote up this research I often wished I had asked the participants about their imagined futures, particularly in terms of the disrupted biographies I outlined in Chapter 4. Temporality was an integral part of this research. This was in terms of the temporal positioning of the generation, the *crunch points* of loneliness, the temporality of adulthood, and the feelings of disruption when specific milestones had not been met. While some of the

participants alluded to how this affected their futures, I often felt retrospectively curious as to how their everyday lives, emotions, and relationships had been affected by, and affected, the ways their futures were anticipated and imagined. This thesis has therefore acted as an important insight into the pasts and presents of everyday loneliness, but further research could build on this, and gain an understanding on the ways loneliness alters and affects futures. Hall and Barron (2021) introduce the idea of *oral histories and futures* as a research method. This innovative method encourages participants to consider their future imaginaries, and draws on the ways present-day identities are shaped by who an individual wants to be in the future. This method could therefore add great value to the geographies of loneliness sub-discipline. It would help open up, and build on, the temporalities of loneliness. Further, it would be of particular value for further scholarship on millennial loneliness. It would help negotiate the socioeconomic and political context that may affect the past, present, and futures of the generation, as well as the manifestation of loneliness.

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter has concluded the thesis by tying the empirical chapters together, outlining my contributions to the understanding of loneliness, giving policy recommendations, and highlighting where I would like to see future research in the field of geographies of loneliness. This thesis has filled a gap in the understanding of loneliness. This is both in terms of a general understanding, as I have given a rich account of the socio-spatial conditions of loneliness. It has also furthered academic knowledge, as it is the first piece of research to give a qualitative, multi-scalar, spatialised, and politicised account of loneliness. Further, it has broadened understanding of the everyday life, emotions, and relationships of the millennial generation. I have critically engaged with ideas around adulthood, and offered a critique that argues norms and expectations of neoliberal adulthood is connected to feelings of loneliness. Further, I have used County Durham as a case study to showcase how structural inequalities are intimately linked to feeling lonely. Overall, I have argued that geography *matters* to loneliness.

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Appendix A. Ethical Approval

Ethical Approval



Wendy Davison
To: Jessie Kelly (PGR)
Cc: Helen Jarvis



Wed 15/08/2018 12:09

Dear Jessie

Thank you for your application for ethical approval of your project *A Lonely Generation? Understanding Loneliness and Togetherness in the Emotional Geographies of Millennials*. I confirm that Prof Daniel Zizzo has approved it on behalf of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Please note that this approval applies to the project protocol as stated in your application - if any amendments are made to this during the course of the project, please submit the revisions to the Ethics Committee in order for them to be reviewed and approved.

Kind regards,

Wendy

Wendy Davison
PA to Lorna Taylor (Faculty Research Manager)
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
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Loneliness and Young Adults: County Durham

Are you aged between 20 and 35 and living in County Durham?



I am looking for young adults in County Durham to take part in my research. This project is about young adults and loneliness. Over 9 million people are lonely in the UK and yet many people feel too ashamed to admit to feeling lonely or isolated.

Anyone can be lonely, but it is often an issue that is associated with older generations. This research aims to hear from the 'missing voices' of the loneliness debate: young adults.

This is your chance to add your perspective on why you and many young adults in the area may be feeling lonely.

If you want to take part and be interviewed, or you'd like some more information on the project, please get in touch by text, phone or email:

Email: j.r.kelly2@newcastle.ac.uk

Phone: 07445599913

You can also find out more at <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/jrkelly2>

Appendix C. Recruitment Leaflet

Why get involved?

Taking part in this project will give you the chance to add your perspective on why loneliness may be an issue for young adults.

Your contribution to the study would be hugely valuable as it will go towards a project which seeks to influence political and policy decisions that work towards combatting loneliness.

You can also be kept up to date on how the project is going and what my findings are through email updates.

Would you like to take part in this research?

If you are interested in being interviewed for my research and would like some more information, please text, phone or email me using the information below:


Email ✉
j.r.kelly2@ncl.ac.uk

Phone ☎
07445599913

Find out more:
<https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/jrkelly2>


Loneliness and Young Adults: County Durham

Are you aged between 20 and 35 and living in County Durham?



Jessie Kelly, Postgraduate Researcher
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology,





My name is Jessie Kelly and I am a PhD researcher at Newcastle University. I am looking for 20-35 years olds living in County Durham to take part in my research.

What is the research about?

This project is about young adults and loneliness. Over 9 million people are lonely in the UK (Campaign to End Loneliness) and yet many people often feel too ashamed to admit to feeling lonely or isolated. There can be many reasons for feeling lonely: becoming a parent for the first time; being new to an area; unemployment; starting a new job; divorce and separation; bereavement; financial issues and so on.

A national conversation about loneliness has started, with increasing attention from the government and in the media. Loneliness is beginning to be seen as something which affects people of all ages, yet it is still commonly associated with older generations.

This project therefore aims to hear from the 'missing voices' in the loneliness debate: young adults.

Who would I like to hear from?

I'm looking for anyone aged 20-35 and living in County Durham to take part in the project. Whether you are employed; unemployed; a student; single; married; a parent; living alone, with parents, flatmates, or a partner; have lived in County Durham all your life, or are new to the area, I want to hear from you whatever your background or circumstances.

Why County Durham?

The focus of this project is on County Durham. This is because it is an area often known for its friendliness, sense of community, strong local identities and attachment to place. I therefore want to explore these ideas and how both loneliness and connection is experienced by young adults in the county.


Being from County Durham myself, it is an area I know well and I am particularly interested in exploring how this important topic affects young people in an area I live in and care about.



What will taking part involve?

If you decide you'd like to part, I will interview you on your experience of loneliness, as well as ask your thoughts on why you think many young people may be feeling lonely.

I'd like to find out about you and your life, and hear the stories of everyday relationships, connections and community, as well as loneliness and isolation.

All interviews would be confidential and your personal details would be kept anonymous. Interviews will take place somewhere convenient for you.





Appendix D. Recruitment Locations

Location
Leaflets distributed and posters displayed:
Clayport Library, Durham
Alington House Community Centre, Durham
ACES Internet Café, Seaham
Dawdon Youth and Community Centre, Seaham
Eastlea Community Centre, Seaham
The Clarke Lister Feel Good Centre, Seaham
The Creative Place, Seaham
Horden Youth and Community Centre, Horden
Seaham Youth and Community Centre, Seaham
Blackhall Community Centre, Blackhall
Women's Tea and Chat Support Group, Eastlea Community Centre, Seaham
Horden Hub House, East Durham Trust
Seaham Library
East Durham Trust
East Durham College
Citizens Advice Bureau, County Durham
PACT House Stanley
Call for participants circulated to their contacts:
Foodcycle Durham
Foodcycle Chester le street
Welfare and liberation officer, Durham SU
East Durham Area Action Partnership (AAP)
Durham AAP
Stanley AAP
Bishop Auckland and Shildon AAP
Chester le street AAP
3 Towns AAP
Healthworks Easington
County Durham Connected
Durham Community Action
Sherburn Community Centre
Communities Together Durham
Roseby Road Wellbeing Centre, Peterlee
Oakerside Community Centre, Peterlee
Advice in County Durham
Citizens Advice Bureau, County Durham
Online Forums (local noticeboard):
Mumsnet
Netmums
Facebook Group Posts:
Everything Chester le Street
South Hetton Have Your Say
Easington Have Your Say
Crook Community and Events
We are Willington
Consett Chatter box
Community Page for Barnard Castle and Teesdale Area
Blackhall Community Page
Crook Present and Future
Crook Past, Present & Future
Bowburn
Framwellgate Moor and Pity Me Disclosure
Crook and Weardale community Noticeboard
Consett County Durham Chatting
Aycliffe Residents Point of View
Durham Have Your Say
The All New Consett Chatter Box TM
Durham
We Love Sacriston
WHATS ON in and around Barnard Castle
Consett Community Group
Advice in County Durham
Stanley Chat
Spennymoor Community Network
East Durham Mams
Whats on in Shildon
Chester le street and stanley area Mum meetups group
Mums and Dads of County Durham
Town of Hartlepool
Ferryhill what's happening now
Tow Law Noticeboard
Mums in Durham
Peterlee Community Connections
The Real Peterlee Have Your Say
Murton Have Your Say
Have Your Say Peterlee and Beyond
Murton Have Your Say!!!!
Horden Have Your Say

Appendix E. Sample of Interview Questions

Average week schedule

- Can you start by just talking to me about your average week?
- Tell me how you feel about the level of contact you have
- are there any days/times during your average week that you feel more connected to other people? Or more isolated? Can you talk me through that? Week days/weekends
- how do you spend your days?

Employment/education

Focus on your education/employment history

Do you work now?

Go back a bit to school

- What did you do once you left school?
- Higher education at all?

Can you tell me a bit about the places you've worked/employment history – more to get an idea of your experience as being a working age adult (not like a job interview question!)

How have you found finding work?

Place

As you know the research is based on young adults living in County Durham, I want to focus a bit on how you find living here

Where do you live now?

How long have you lived here?

Lived any other places?

How does it compare?

What do you think of living here? How does it compare to other place(s) you've lived?

Transport

- How do you get around? Walk? Public transport? Drive?

County Durham can sometimes be known as somewhere that is friendly and people often refer to a sense of community –

I'm interested to hear how you'd describe what community means to you?

Would you agree that there is a sense of community in County Durham?

- Do you feel a sense of community where you are?
- Do you feel part of a community?
- Is that something that is important to you?
- Do you know your neighbours?
- Are the majority of your contacts/connections from the area? How do you meet people?

Personal community

- Who would you say are the most significant people in your life?
- What are your relationships to these people?
- How do you usually contact these people?
- Does it make a difference to how important you consider these people in terms of how often you interact with them?
- What was the criteria for including these people?
- What role do they play in your life?
- How do you like to have contact with these people? Does it matter how you communicate? Long distance/everyday

How has this changed over the years? Do the same people feature?

- When you were at school - Left school
- Employment? - Education?

Changes in your life can lead to changes in your relationships

- Are there any periods in your life that stick out to you that changed relationships in your life?

Friendships/relationships

What are the main ways you communicate with other people?

How do you socialize? In what spaces?

How has this changed over the years? Does this impact on how often you interact with people?

Working and friendships/relationships

Family – seeing parents and in laws on a weekly basis

Living arrangements

Live alone/with others?

How does your living arrangement impact on your social life? Compared to other times in your life?

Being a young adult

Social media often considered a distinguishing part of being a young adult

- Do you use social media?
- How do you think social media has influenced you and your relationships?

Do you think being a young adult comes with any expectations of what you should be doing in your life? Or the kind of relationships you should have?

How does your experience of young adulthood compare to other people?

Loneliness

A lot of young adults feel lonely – and its actually one of the main age groups to report feeling lonely – over older generations

What is your reaction to that?

What do you understand loneliness to mean?

Is there anything about young adulthood that you think can lead to being lonely?

Are you aware of people around you – your age group – saying they feel lonely?

Is loneliness something you'd discuss with other people?

What motivated you to take part in this research?

Are there any times in your life that you've felt lonely? can you share this with me?

How do you cope with feeling alone?

How does feeling lonely impact on other areas of your life, if at all?

Do you know anyone else that would be willing to be interviewed?

Participant profile

Age –

Location –

Household profile –

Employment status –

How did they find out about project?



SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY,

POLITICS AND SOCIOLOGY

Loneliness and Young Adults: County Durham

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

The researcher will provide a written document for you to read before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from this, ask the researcher before you decide whether to take part. You will be given a copy of the Information Sheet and this consent form to keep.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet provided and have been provided the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without needing to give a reason.

I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.

I understand that the audio-recording will be transcribed and that all identifying information will be anonymised

I understand that the data will only be used for research purposes

Name of participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature



Loneliness and Young Adults in County Durham: Information Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. My name is Jessie Kelly and I am a PhD student at Newcastle University. My research is on young adults and loneliness in County Durham.

The aim of this research is to find out more about how loneliness is experienced by younger generations in the county. You do not necessarily have to consider yourself to be lonely all the time, or to be lonely presently, I am just interested in hearing about any experiences you may have had, as well as your perspective on it as an issue facing younger generations.

To do this, I want to find out more about you and your life, and hear about your everyday relationships, connections, communities and any periods of isolation and loneliness. We will do this by first discussing and/or completing the exercises I sent to you prior to this interview. This will be followed by an interview where I will ask you questions about your life, friendships, relationships and experience of loneliness. It is expected that the interview will take between 1 and 2 hours.

The interview is intended to be a positive experience for you to tell me about your experiences and is designed to make you feel at ease. You do not need to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with, nor do you need to tell me anything that you wish to keep private.

With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview to help me with transcription later. Please let me know if you do not feel comfortable with this and I will take hand-written notes. If you wish, you may have a copy of the transcription to confirm it is a true reflection of what you said in your interview. Your identity will remain confidential within my research and your name and any other personal details will be anonymised. Remember that your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point.

If you wish to contact me to discuss the research, ask any questions or raise any concerns, my email address is j.r.kelly2@newcastle.ac.uk.

Alternatively, if you wish to check anything about my research, you can also contact my PhD supervisors using the following information:

Dr Helen Jarvis: helen.jarvis@newcastle.ac.uk

Professor Alison Stenning: Alison.stenning@newcastle.ac.uk

Thank you again for your time and participation, it is greatly appreciated.

Jessie Kelly

Postgraduate Researcher, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University



Loneliness and Young Adults in County Durham: Debriefing Sheet

Thank you for taking your time to participate in this project, it is greatly appreciated.

The purpose of this project was to collect your thoughts, feelings and experience of relationships, connections, community, loneliness and isolation. The project is based on the experience of young adults as it is often a perspective left out of conversations about loneliness. I am also interested in learning more about how your generation may be more susceptible to feelings of loneliness as you have grown up with social media in formative adulthood.

County Durham was selected as it is an area with a mix of urban and rural communities, which can often be associated with connection and/or isolation. It is also an area that has a history of disinvestment from central government to its local governments, which has led to fewer opportunities, higher levels of unemployment and poor transport links in the county, all of which can contribute to greater isolation.

Overall, however, I am interested in hearing your personal story and perception of loneliness as each person's experience can be different and be particular to you as an individual.

I will analyse the data that you and other participants have provided me, hoping to draw out some key themes which will inform the findings of my PhD thesis. You may request a copy of the transcript from your interview to confirm that it is a true reflection of what you told me. No one else will have access to these and they will be stored in a secure location. Your name and personal details will also be anonymised in the study.

Your participation has been entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your contribution to the project at any time.

Once the data has been analysed and I have my findings for the project, I am happy to discuss the research with you. My email address is j.r.kelly2@newcastle.ac.uk if you wish to contact me.

Thank you.

Jessie Kelly

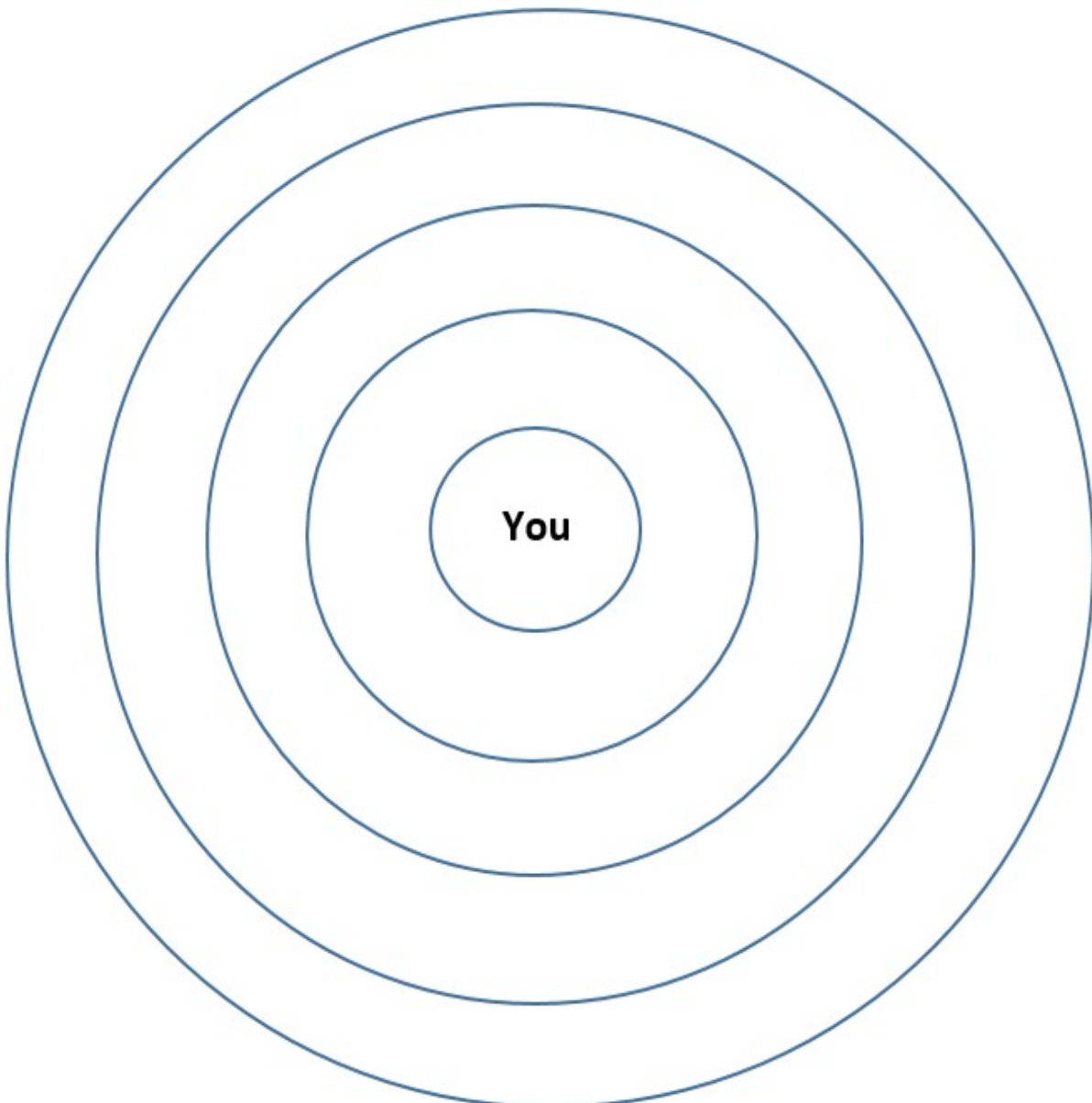
Postgraduate Researcher, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University

Appendix I. Personal Community Map

Your Personal Community

In this exercise, I'd like you to mark on the important or significant relationships in your life (this can be anyone: family, friends, children, partner, husband/wife, neighbour, colleague etc.).

Work from 'you' in the centre and write down the people you are closest to on the 'ring' closest to the centre. Work outwards from here, noting down the names of people you maybe see less frequently or you aren't as close to – but still class them as significant to you.



The purpose of this exercise is to give me an idea of the relationships in your life, helping me with my interview with you. Don't worry about spending a lot of time on it or putting too much detail into it, we will discuss it more in the interview.

Appendix J. Relationship Diary

Your Week

If you have the chance, please fill out the table below to show me what a 'normal week' looks like for you, including your day-to-day activities and any contact you have with other people, whether this is socialising with friends, seeing people at work, talking to your neighbours, chatting to a family member on the phone etc. This can be discussed in more detail during the interview, but it will just help me understand more clearly about your everyday life and relationships.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				

Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

