



Article

# Towards an understanding of loneliness among Australian men: Gender cultures, embodied expression and the social bases of belonging

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## Abstract

Recent quantitative investigations consistently single out considerable gender variations in the experience of loneliness in Australia, and in particular how men are especially prone to protracted and serious episodes of loneliness. In 2017 the Director of Lifeline implicated loneliness as a significant factor in suicide among Australian men – currently three times the rate of suicide among women. Compared to women men also struggle to talk about loneliness or seek help from a range

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of informal and professional sources. We know very little about men's experience of loneliness or why they are so susceptible to it currently and research is urgently needed in order to design specific interventions for them. To date, psychology has dominated the theoretical research on loneliness but in this article we argue that sociology has a key role to play in broadening out the theoretical terrain of this understanding so as to create culturally informed interventions. Most researchers agree that loneliness occurs when belongingness needs remain unmet, yet it is also acknowledged that such needs are culturally specific and changing. We need to understand how loneliness and *gender cultures* configure for men; how they are located in different ethnic, class and age cohort cultures as well as the changing social/economic/spatial/public/institutional bases for *belonging* across Australia. Theoretical enquiry must encompass the broader social structural narratives (Bauman, Giddens and Sennett) and link these to the changing nature of belonging in everyday life – across the public sphere, the domestic sphere, work, in kinship systems, housing and settlement patterns, associational life, in embodied relationships and online.

### **Keywords**

Bauman, gender cultures, kinship, loneliness, phenomenology, public realm

Recent studies of loneliness in Australia show it is affecting a very large proportion of the Australian population (of all ages) (Arbes et al., 2014; Baker, 2012; Flood, 2005; Franklin, 2012; Franklin and Tranter, 2008, 2011) and is linked to social structural changes associated with liquid modernity and neoliberalism (Franklin 2009, 2016; Franklin and Tranter 2011). There is also recent evidence that suggests loneliness is growing in Australia (Baker, 2012; Franklin, 2016). While women and men face the spectre of loneliness together, they do not experience it in the same way and therefore we need to know more about its gendered nature and experience. Flood (2005) observed that married women rather than married men initiate, maintain and extend marital/partnered social circles and women have far more primary relationships in them than men. Thus, break-ups can leave 'kin-keeper' women with significant levels of support while men may have very little and few social skills to rekindle old ones or initiate and maintain new ones (Jamieson et al., 2009; Uhlmann, 2013). Indeed, Franklin and Tranter (2011) found that men feel less able to talk about their loneliness and do far less about worsening states of loneliness. Among the 25–44-year-old cohort (an age group that had in the past demonstrated one of the lowest rates of loneliness) in a 2008 Australian national sample survey, Franklin and Tranter (2008) found that 33% reported loneliness to be 'a serious problem for them at times'. Whereas before this time the highest rates of loneliness were found among the post-retirement group and young adults, Franklin and Tranter (2008) found the 25–44-year-olds to be the most at-risk group in Australia and men to be significantly more at risk than women. For example, whereas separated women in this cohort are less than twice as likely to suffer serious loneliness as married women, separated men are over 13 times more likely than married men to experience loneliness as a serious problem. We need to know why this group stand out in this way and why changes that are seemingly common to both men and women are leaving men more vulnerable to loneliness.

Combined with a lack of emotional candour, Australian men's social awkwardness, 'laziness' and dependency leave them more vulnerable once they become lonely – and here again their pathways into loneliness have gendered characteristics associated with

the changing nature of work and public life (Arbes et al., 2014; Franklin, 2016). To make matters worse, this vulnerability extends across the life course. Flood (2005) found that ‘men tend to be lonelier than women from early adulthood right through to old age. They are more likely to agree that ‘I often feel very lonely’; ‘People don’t come to visit me as much as I’d like’; ‘I don’t have anyone I can confide in’; and ‘I don’t have anyone to lean on in times of trouble’ (Flood, 2005: vii). Substantially, more men between the age of 15 and 54 now live alone in Australia. As yet, there has been little research aimed at explicating and understanding men’s loneliness or any attempt to link that knowledge to focused policy responses and individual interventions. It is time for researchers to dig deeper into the life worlds of lonely Australian men.

In this article we argue that before we can design (a) better interventions for individuals and (b) social policies that foster conditions that obviate the onset of loneliness, we need to further expand the research base on men, their gender cultures and *their* loneliness (see also Patulny, 2013; Patulny and Seaman, 2017; Patulny and Wong, 2013; Uhlmann, 2013; Wasoff and Jamieson, 2005a) as well as on how care organisations engage with loneliness (Arles, 2015; Missan and Sergeant, 2008). New research that identifies the gendered, socially embedded and embodied pathways of men’s loneliness is urgently needed to address its social and economic costs, linked as it is to highly corrosive impacts on physical and mental health, the functionality of communities, schools, universities, workplaces, city life, happiness and satisfaction (Franklin, 2010; Mellor et al., 2008). According to Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010), the risk of death from loneliness is comparable with other established mortality risk factors (smoking, alcohol, physical inactivity, obesity). The urgency of contemporary loneliness is illustrated by the UK’s recent decision to appoint a specific minister to tackle it in a country where ‘9 million people often or always feel lonely’ (Walker, 2018). We need to reconsider how we understand loneliness through a *wider* social lens, one that also considers the complex interaction of social structures and norms in the way men experience loneliness across their life course.

This article therefore looks closely at some important historic bases of *belonging* for Australian men and how recent social structural and cultural changes have impacted them leaving so many prone to enduring forms loneliness. We will consider the value of a closer sociological focus on loneliness as a consequence of the slow, compounding creep of ever-weaker social ties on the pre-reflexive, embodied interfaces of belonging. Here we also identify the insights of phenomenological and other in-depth embodied approaches that can inspire new forms of qualitative research on loneliness. The aim here is to develop a deeper understanding of loneliness relevant to intervention and policy, but also by way of refining our capacity to survey loneliness more accurately.

## The social contexts of loneliness

Defined broadly as social isolation and emotional disconnection from others (Stanley et al., 2010), in recent years psychologists and sociologists now give greater emphasis to its connection with the *quality* of relationships rather than the number of social connections per se. Mellor et al. (2008) argue that most people need a minimum number of lasting, positive and significant relationships to provide sense of belonging. When belongingness needs remain unmet, a person descends into loneliness and this ‘may lead

to lasting feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness' (Mellor et al., 2008: 213). Some studies have shown that a stable marriage or other loving relationship is all that is needed for some to avoid feeling lonely (Kiley, 1989). For others, loneliness might be perceived only in the absence of specific groups or concentrations of kin, work colleagues, old friends, sisters or brothers or people from the same generation (Dahlberg, 2007). Thus, what is absent in the lives of the lonely is, seemingly, culturally specific, qualitatively/emotionally strong bonds that offer a sense of belonging. Mellor and colleagues see cultural expectations as drivers of the way people report and account for loneliness and we argue that these are articulated in specifically gendered ways, through recognisable *gender cultures*. While Australian men do identify forms of social contact that they consider essential, they are more likely than women to lack such contact (Patulny, 2013). Gender cultures are significant because they do not necessarily give rise to the same mix of belongingness needs and expectations for men and women, or the same emotional language for expressing them (Hochschild, 1979). They are what Goffman called 'interaction orders' that assert themselves as 'stubborn and static continuities', that draw on a sense of tradition and cultural prescription which may stay with individuals all their lives or over many generations (Goffman, 1983:5; see also Butera, 2008: 268). They evolve in specific social and economic milieus and are too deeply embedded to reflexively change or adapt easily to changing circumstances as we progress through the life course. Yet we have very little understanding of them in theoretical or operational senses, as they impact on loneliness among Australian men.

We need to know what, if any of these sources of belonging have been affected by a weakening of the social bonds that enacted them – that even when the culturally appropriate people, groups or organisations are around us we can still feel lonely because the belongingness they once afforded is not there, or only available in a weaker form. Thus, to make effective interventions in respect to men's elevated rates of loneliness, we need to understand how gendered culture norms shape belongingness in different time frames and spaces across the life course, and how social and cultural changes affect men's capacities to maintain or adapt them. In order to do that we will now consider four potentially important dimensions of the changing nature of men's belonging:

The first will consider the significance of the interplay between freedom, individualism and belonging in the overarching narratives of change in late/liquid modernity. The second considers loneliness, belonging and their connection to changes in the embodied practices of social bonds. The third considers how, in the case of men, belongingness needs may have been impacted by changes to the wider social bases of their gender cultures, and here will look at the changing interplay between belonging, kinship and neighbourhood. The fourth considers the relationship between men's sense of belonging and the public sphere, a social domain which they were once held to dominate and control but where their presence has steadily declined over a long period.

We ask: what does it mean to 'belong' to a relationship (family, community, work, etc.) when everyone in it is doing their own thing? When they are preoccupied with progressing individual careers, spiralling off into cyberspace pursuing interests not embedded in their immediate social circles or locality? What does it mean to belong to a company where workers find themselves in competition, seeking salvation through personal metrics rather than collective objectives; when tea rooms and sporting facilities

disappear; when the observation of staff birthdays is discouraged; when short-term contracts replace continuing positions. What does it mean to belong to a community when its factories, jobs and plant are offshored once cheaper sources of labour are secured (Bauman, 2005; Kurmelov, 2016; Meek, 2017)?

## Freedom and belonging in the overarching narratives of change in late/liquid modernity

Looming large in sociological narratives of contemporary loneliness is the active pursuit of freedom from a range of more binding ties, commitments, immobilities and 'bases of belonging'. For Bauman (2000), individualism has been growing in strength during an era of liquid modernity, especially since the consumer, feminist and 'alternative' movements of 1960s and 1970s, and has been compounded by the economic and political freedoms pursued by neoliberalism since the early 1980s. Neoliberalism fuelled corporate aspirations to be free of national, paternalistic and welfarist social bonds to employees, citizens, industries, cities and regions. The curse of loneliness was threaded through Bauman's narrative of liquid modernity and it is easy to see why. At all levels of society, the quality and strength of social bonds were in jeopardy because of growing and toxic connections between the economic and social spheres. The way we related to things as consumers began to influence how we related to each other. Just like our connection with consumables, our connections with each other become 'until further notice'.

Other sociologists affirmed the general direction of Bauman's conclusions even if they used different metaphors and language, and put a more positive spin on the state of relationship change. In Giddens (1992), the 'personal freedom and growth' aspects of individualism remained essentially positive, and the arrival of a norm preference for 'mutual pleurability' as the only viable basis for relationships was translated into a positive too: the so-called 'pure relationship'. However worded, the implications for the emotional experience of loneliness were the same. For Bauman, these broader currents of change were encountered by many individuals without the emotional capacity to adapt. The rupture was not so easily talked through or disclosed by emotions tuned to older gender cultures and here Bauman failed to notice significant gendered implications of loneliness (Franklin, 2016; Bauman, 2005). For Giddens (1992), this emotional experience was again expressed more positively as the stimulus to grow stronger and create more effective and valued relationships. However, Giddens (1992) did not address how the arrival of the pure relationship would impact on people whose emotional becoming had been based on stronger, enduring and binding relationships as the basis for their sense of belonging (Jamieson, 1999; Jamieson et al., 2009), or their capacity to renegotiate them through the life course. There is little consideration in Giddens of gender cultures as something deep-seated, obdurate, *pre-reflexive* and resistant to reflexivity. With Giddens (1992), we are left where he begins, with therapy, with regimes of therapeutic reflexivity and the constantly reflexive individual working it out as they go. He never factored in serious cases of loneliness as a common outcome which disables the coping individual as much as it disconnects them. He never factored in Australian men, who are both prone to serious loneliness and seemingly unable to talk about it with anyone *at all* (Franklin and Tranter, 2008, 2011) – least of all a therapist.

If loneliness is implicit in Bauman and conspicuous by its absence in Giddens, there is a sense in which the theoretical/analytical work of both authors does not come close enough to the necessarily embodied and sensual nature of relationships. In both we might note their cognitive emphasis on the state of the individual rather than the fleshy, emotional relationality of social bonds, though as we noted, for Bauman loneliness was a signature emotion for liquid modernity. We might also note the formalistic, proxy-driven and typological nature of attempts to grasp loneliness empirically – through such instruments as the UCLA Loneliness Scale. If loneliness is experienced sensually as affect and if it is thereby equally a result of embodied change, then we need to look more closely at how broader currents of social change have disturbed the embodied performances of belonging.

### Loneliness, belonging and embodiment

Phenomenological approaches have long shown how our sense of well-being, including belonging, inclusion, love, etc., is made explicit through our intersubjective and embodied encounters in ways that are only fully knowable through their performance; through non-verbal communication as much as the spoken word. To a significant degree then, we become conscious of ourselves and our connections with others through their gaze; how we are *seen* by others, or *regarded* which includes more than merely the gaze (Derrida, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The lonely commonly say they feel *invisible* (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2015; Peplau and Perlman, 1982; Webofloneliness, 2015). We need to ask: how do people come to be sure they belong or do not belong, and are wanted and valued? And through what aspects of embodied forms of social engagement and expression?

We already know from previous work (Franklin and Tranter, 2008) that while most survey respondents respond confidently to questions about their *experience* of loneliness (its duration, frequency and intensity), around half found it difficult to pin-point the causes/triggers.

Some research suggests that loneliness feelings are triggered, as well as experienced, through changes in the *embodied* expression of these relationships – often perceived in pre-reflective moments as we attend to one another in non-verbal ways, and in new temporalities and spatial contexts (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Franklin, 2012). The slow creep from strong to weaker bonds across multiple bases of belonging may engender a gradual accretion of embodied expressive *absences* that come to replace the more positive space-time of ‘pre-reflective affirmation’ through mutual regard.

Loneliness is elusive, not because it is intangible but because what prevents it from occurring is the constant traffic of non-verbalised and pre-reflective forms of embodied confirmation and affirmation of significant and enduring connections. Formal connections of marriage and co-residence with another could even magnify a sense of loneliness if they did not also communicate/affirm culturally appropriate forms of embodied connection. We are not dealing with relationships changing in formal terms, but possibly the way they are performed and their perceived quality. Loneliness is an emotional response to an absence rather than a readily identifiable event/change in one’s life, and this is why respondents find it difficult to conceptualise and thus recall, for themselves or for a researcher.

While subtle, these changes work on the emotions through such things as the maintenance of face-to-face contact, the time given to others, through touch, through attentiveness to each other's lives; through doing things with others; by tracking others' movements. In other words, through expressing a need to be with others, wanting to care for others and to be cared for by them. Within contemporary marriages and partnerships, we might note the diverging pathways of dual careers, the increasing pressure to spend time with work colleagues out of office hours, the tendency to bring work home and expanding commute times. Others argue that workplaces 'have come to compete with families as people's primary "emotional culture"' (Hochschild, 1997, cited in Crow, 2002: 68). Together with devotion to highly individualised online interests and activities in what remains of their leisure, the time made available for embodied co-presence with domestic partners, children, other family, friends and others is thereby reduced. In a national survey of face-to-face contact, for example, Patulny and Seaman (2017: 12) found a significant reduction in face-to-face contact over just the five-year period 2002-6, and one that was more pronounced in men of all ages.

For Dahlberg (2007) 'loneliness must be understood as something belonging to "being-in-the-world"' (Heidegger, 1998 [1927]); and to "the flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968 [1948]). Loneliness reflects a changed consciousness of ourselves as we sense the presence or absence of the gaze, attention, co-presence, touch and judgement of others. Online support networks for lonely people such as the Webofloneliness (2015) and Campaign to End Loneliness (2015) agree with Peplau and Perlman (1982) that the lonely frequently feel *invisible*, inconsequential or worthless, as though they no longer matter to anyone – as if they have disappeared. Feeling cold is also among the most common descriptions of the experience of loneliness (Kirova, 2003), as is a sense of being engulfed by time (Dahlberg, 2007). Being seen, recognised, acknowledged and held in regard by others appears to be critical in affirming a sense of connection and belonging.

These fleshy or embodied gestures that constantly signal and affirm belonging are significant because they take place in what phenomenologists call the *pre-reflective* register. Husserl (1973) showed how 'pre-reflexive' encounters with others are notoriously difficult to recall since they are attended to so closely as they are enacted, rather than reflected on at the time and formed into coherent thoughts, conclusions and memories. And since these experiences are less available to recall at later times (to survey instruments, or in interviews, for example), it may be especially important to document such exchanges at the very moment they occur. Methodologies that depend on human reflective self-consciousness (of the sort mobilised in quantitative surveys using the UCLA Loneliness Scale) may be less apt, less sharp, than those that home in on and document the pre-reflexive fields of experience at the points of action and performance. As Husserl once said, there is a delay, distance or difference between the reflecting subject and the reflected object: 'When I reflect there is always something missing about my experience which will evade my reflective grasp' (1973: 9). At present we have very little idea of the gendering of these forms of engagement. We might ask whether men are as unforthcoming in embodied terms as they are in verbalised exchanges. We might use intensive/immersive ethnographic methods to probe the social encounters of lonely and less lonely men to see whether men (and their partners) might benefit from training for emotional work.

## Loneliness, gender cultures and the wider bases of 'belongingness needs'

While many studies recognise that the perception/reckoning of loneliness is culturally, ethnically and gender specific, very few studies of loneliness operationalise culture, ethnicity or gender-cultures, or see important continuities between them. In fact, many studies operate with universal definitions and scales of loneliness, and use an arbitrary range of *proxy* measures such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale. While these are indispensable, they can only take us so far. What is clearly required is an approach that evaluates how current relationships measure up to very specific socially, culturally and spatially normalised expectations about belonging, as they are driven by different kinship systems, forms of social and political solidarity, labour processes, public and private realms, gender cultures and embodied life worlds. We must remember that the reckoning of loneliness is about belonging and belonging has ethnic origins.

### *Kinship*

The ways in which different family and kinship structures order the microstructures of everyday life, specify distinctively embodied choreographies of engagement and interaction, and affect the perception and experience of loneliness. They are far too complex and consequential to be reduced to simple models, network structures or reductive binary coding such as the now ubiquitous weak ties/strong ties. In a globalising world and with the emergence of global cities, loneliness must be tackled by practitioners competent in the ethnically specific connections between kinship, gender, belonging and loneliness (Davis, 1977). Social anthropologists argue that kinship is transacted between the social and the spatial dimensions of belonging.

The bilateral or cognatic kinship patterns of modern Europe, and its settler societies elsewhere, are very far from being the most effective kinship system for conveying a sense of belonging for their constituent individuals, communities and cultures. In anthropological terms, their bilateral patterns always constituted 'a rather messy principle of social organisation' and, in purely structural and operational terms, the Western family as a social institution offered a less stable sense of belonging (Llobera, 2003 45; Macfarlane, 1986) than unilineal kinship forms found elsewhere. Tracing affiliation through both parents extends bilateral descent infinitely, generationally and laterally, without ever defining a boundary around a specific group. In practice, arbitrary limits are drawn to describe an entity typically bounded by the four grandparents of ego and extended at least to their second cousins. This relatively small number of relatives is known (by anthropologists) as a kindred. It is, at best, a vague and fuzzy concept with no legal or civic standing, primarily because they are never the same for any two people, with the only exception of siblings. Without having a common ancestor or a sense of group belonging to define them, Anglo-Australian family forms are instead ego-centred and overlapping as well as changing (for any one person) *through the life course* (Llobera, 2003). Indeed, for this very reason such kinships systems are incapable of carrying out the same range of social functions as unilineal kinship. Thus, in English and Anglo-colonial cultures, the social bases of belonging have been more distributed across a complex of

other institutions, sites and places that organise/articulate domains of life beyond the domestic/private – workplaces, guilds, the military, politics, civic life, the parish, rituals, sport, national life, legal institutions, trade, the pub, the church. And these spheres also involve specifically patterned gender-cultures and impact on men especially. Yet, to date these domains exist outside the bounds of research into contemporary loneliness.

The dominant bilateral kinship form of white Anglo-Australian culture (around 70% of the Australian population are of Anglo-Saxon descent) also involves matrilineal residence following marriage, with the consequence that concentrations of related women coalesce in specific neighbourhoods. Men on the other hand are detached from their natal families and neighbourhoods and scattered. The maintenance of these co-residential cohorts is a form of women's business, which anthropologists call 'kin-keeping' or 'kinship work' (Uhlmann, 2013; Yanagisako, 1977), though Lynch (1989) gives it a stronger qualification as 'solidary work' – building solidarity and belonging. Here we can see how men acquire a sense of belonging without being an active party to its transaction.

For men living within these forms of bilateral kinship, both their natal and marital localities are created, socially organised and maintained through women's gender cultures (Young and Wilmott, 1957). All the while they maintain strong and stable relationships with, and *through*, these women, they derive 'effortlessly' a very strong sense of belonging to a wider social entity; never, apparently, needing to learn how the invisible emotional work that produces belonging is done. However, while many aspects of British bilateral matrifocal kinship were transplanted in settler society, in Australia this system was disturbed by an important absence: women.

A gender balance in the Australian population was not reached until the 20th century and in the formative first half of the 19th century men came to rely more on each other for many life chances, forming joint households and more enduring (and possibly stronger) bonds than might have been the case had they remained embedded in England's matrilineal culture. The complex new relationships between men, contained in the notion of mateship, created a gender culture robust and enduring enough to persist beyond the time when a gender balance was restored (ABS, 2014). A conclusion of this sort is strongly suggested by Dempsey's (1992) ethnography of a rural small town in Victoria. Dempsey found that men 'conspired' to live as much as they can in their own company, effectively excluding women from key locations of work, pub and sporting club grounds. In this gender culture, women found themselves isolated inside their own marriages and abandoned to the domestic sphere unless they made their husbands interests, enthusiasms and spaces their own.

While men are today considerably more involved in childcare and domestic/household affairs than they were in the past, it is still the case that women are largely responsible for domestic and familial management, and have continued to perform the role of kin-keeper (Baxter, 2000; Habibis et al., 2016; Millward, 1996). Heterosexual marriages among Australians of British descent continue to favour matrilineal residence and a *matrifocal* bias, where mothers maintain very close ties with their married daughters and their husbands (Stevens, 1985; Millward and de Vaus, 1997; Uhlmann, 2013). This is reflected, for example, in how much closer Australian grandchildren are to their maternal grandparents. Weston and Qu (2009) found that '[b]oth mothers and fathers were more likely to consider that their children had a "very close" relationship with their maternal

grandparents than with their paternal grandparents'. From a wider social perspective, this pattern is significant for the way in which married daughters are more likely to stay within the orbit of their natal friendship networks. When married daughters maintain these, and their mothers maintain close ties with their daughters, the pool of people their husbands associate with most is strongly mediated through their wives, and their contribution to, and capacity for, kinship work falls away to nothing. As Uhlmann argues, wider family networks in Australia are 'therefore largely managed by women' – a trend that was exacerbated under capitalism. This involved the separation between public and private spheres (Collier et al., 1982); Zaretsky, 1986). Also, factors that once supported strong masculine ties among relatives have disappeared, including (among working-class Australians):

the formalisation of vocational education at the expense of paternal initiation of sons into trades, the highly diminished tendency for sons to follow in the occupational footsteps of their father, and finally, the weakening of industrial trade unions and the closed shop which institutionalised nepotism in labour recruitment. (Uhlmann, 2013: 49)

For these and other reasons, it is argued that men have dropped key aspects of traditional mateship such as 'group loyalty', while retaining an ambivalence about exchanging social support among themselves and continuing to assert a stoic sense of self-reliance (Butera, 2008). Only the youngest cohort of men in Butera's study ventured into more expressive relationships with each other, and even then, a new norm had not been established among them of a kind we might expect if Giddens's (1992) notion of a 'pure relationship' was more widely entrenched. To gesture at friendship with other men using more emotional candour carried risks for Butera's respondents, who feared 'losing face and footing' (2008: 277). The breakdown of the industrial bases of men's work – relatively stable though most of the 20th century – also broke down the potential to make and maintain mateship and a separable world of men's friendships.

The implications of these factors explain why gender cultures modify the experience of loneliness and produce such strongly contrasting experiences between Australian men and women. On the face of it, women have extended their social relationships through work while maintaining the role of kin-keeper in the familial sphere. The emotional candour they brought to bear in the making and maintenance of kinship is almost certainly an asset for extending their sense of belonging to new groups made in the workplace. At the same time, men may have been doubly disadvantaged. At a time when both relationship breakdown and job losses have become more common and regularised through the life course (Flood, 2005), their loss of a sense of group loyalty through the norms and spaces of mateship, and their failure to develop the capacity to create and maintain strong bonds under new circumstances, has left them vulnerable to more prolonged episodes of loneliness. The social bonds they enjoy as husbands are largely based on primary relationships established by their wives and partners and, in many instances, these are broken off completely following relationship breakdown. Seemingly men now need to learn and practise kin-keeping. New research might focus on the extent to which men who cope better with loneliness made inroads toward being kin-keepers. Their experiences might offer insights into strategies that work.

## **Men's gender cultures and the public sphere**

There is a tendency in much of the loneliness literature to imagine that loneliness can be ameliorated through individual strategies and skills designed to forge and maintain new relationships. While this may be important, for many men a sense of belonging is ideally derived from multiple and overlapping roles and participation in a public realm that has been steadily shrinking since the 19th century (Bishop and Hogget, 1986; Jacobs, 1961; Sennett, 2017; Storch, 1982; Westbury, 2011; Zukin, 2010).

The analogue of women's historical dominion over the domestic, familial and neighbourhood realm was men's greater orientation to, and domination of, the public realm (Massey, 1994; Miles, 2000). It is here that we must investigate where changes in men's public engagement impacted their sense of belonging, and where opportunities for recovering it may lie in the future. As 'Men's Sheds' showed, men can be given back a role in the public/work sphere (Ormsby et al., 2010) to good effect. Men's Sheds was a government-sponsored health scheme which stumbled across a source of men's sense of connection, intimacy and belonging at the interface between public usefulness and work. It suggested that men do not so much 'fail' to enact the same social bond-making skills as women as make them in different contexts/spaces and in qualitatively different ways (Patulny, 2013). Men's Shed's was intended to intervene in high rates of men's depression following retirement, but it became apparent that the problem was depression brought on by loneliness – an effect of losing the contexts in which their bonds and sense of belonging were forged – by working together with other men, making things or other contributions of public value.

The considerable scope for building on the experience of Men's Sheds is indicated by the process through which so much public life in Western cities was removed. This has largely been forgotten, though it was a significant discovery in the 1970s and 1980s (Daunton, 1983; Thompson, 1992). However, with Australian cities now trying to 're-activate the streets' and rebuild civic publics (Westbury, 2011) it has never been more relevant. It offers insights for the recovery of bases for belonging for men and new opportunities for those once excluded from equal participation.

### ***Deactivating the public realm***

Where once streets, squares and markets across the Western world, were busy economic, cultural, ritual, political and expressive spaces, and where men once lived a considerable part of their lives several periods and processes of deliberate 'quietening', 'deactivating' and privatising left cities bereft of their historic public realm, and men, arguably marooned in suburbanised, privatised quietude.

Beginning in the 19th century, 'common public space was as far as possible sterilized' through the comprehensive introduction of bye-laws and street acts to remove the freedom of assembly for trades, markets, festivity, politics, music and the maintenance of local custom from city life, and enforced by significant investments in policing (Daunton, 1983: 270; Simpson, 2015; Storch, 1976: 482). Churchill (2014) notes from police records, how the police were resented and opposed vigorously and physically, 'almost exclusively by men', when they began to interfere in autonomous areas of working-class custom.

The richly textured presence of 19th-century popular culture was simultaneously customary *and* contemporary in its dealings with community, political and civic challenges and it became a threat to an emerging consensus on social order (Daunton, 1983; Storch, 1982).

From the 1880s through to the mid-20th century, popular cultural expression in public spaces was systematically replaced by top-down modes of instruction and ‘civilising’ activities via new institutions dedicated to ‘improving leisures’: especially through public art galleries, libraries and museums, and through ‘modernised’ versions of traditional games and sports (Bennett, 1995; Elias and Dunning, 1986). Thus was the public realm of men not only privatised and domesticated, its participatory and semi-autonomous organisational life was also gradually closed down and turned into passive forms of spectatorship, instruction and fitness (Sennett, 2017).

This was reinforced by the replacement of largely self-organised and volatile trades with an increasingly stable form of employment with large-scale paternalistic manufacturers. The guarantee of regular, well-paid work with good working conditions, company-assisted home ownership, and family-based recruitment was exchanged for sobriety, political docility, privatism and company loyalty (Daunton, 1983).

Modern planners and architects replaced the public realm with socially indifferent acreages of office developments, retail zones, high-rise apartments buildings, low-budget high-rise social housing projects and conduits to new super highways. While the legacy of high rise in the UK has been largely demolished in favour of its original housing form, in Australia building new mixes of high- and medium-rise housing (with little or no public space between blocks) is currently in full swing, often taking out a large number of the traditional corner block hotels (Kirkby, 2010). Currently, concern is currently being expressed about both new developments and the loneliness and associated mental health problems that are becoming a full-blown national problem (Lutton, 2017; Norrie, 2012).

### *Recovering a public realm to tackle loneliness*

In recent years, we can identify two major paths which promised to recover/enrich a public realm and civil participation. The first came with the advent of the internet (Turkle, 2015), and the second with the cities ‘activation’ movement which originated in the final collapse of manufacturing in Western cities, and high hopes that jobs, income and cultural life could be stimulated through the cultural economy, creative industries and a livelier civic culture (O’Connor, 2014 Westbury, 2011).

*Networked publics?* In the early years of internet expansion much was made of its potential to constitute a space for a utopian public realm (boyd, 2011: 39; Turkle, 2015). Indeed, a direct link was made by boyd (2007) between the *increasingly tightly regulated* spaces of cities and the timely arrival of open access ‘networked publics’ constituted by social network sites. The issue that concerned researchers was how the social nature of these transactions and publics differed from those they replaced. While opening up individuals to a much wider world Robards (2010: 10) argues that the pioneering first generation of youthful users ‘are not [now] using social network sites to meet new people. Rather, they are being used to articulate and develop existing relationships.’

An interest in depression, loneliness and its links to internet use prompted a novel new approach by Bessiere et al. (2015) that took into account all forms of internet activity and controlled for 'initial levels of social resource and well-being'. They found that using the internet to maintain existing relationships reduced pre-existing levels of depression. However, the opposite was the case when it was used as a tool for meeting new people: 'the people who did so show *significantly more* depression at time 2' (Bessiere et al., 2015: 17–18, emphasis added). Confirming Bauman's fears, these results provide a convincing test of a more nuanced social displacement hypothesis: 'that online communication with weak-tie relationships may come at the expense of existing strong-tie relationships in real life' (Bessiere et al., 2015: 18).

boyd (2011) also raised the notion of 'networked publics' in the sense of enrolling people into contemporary issues and politics of their world. boyd argued that the internet would 'force everyday people to contend with environments in which contexts are regularly colliding' (2011: 50). However, contending is not acting, and it is not at all clear that public engagement through new technologies would necessarily operate in the same way virtual public realms do, via the clarification of group belonging, the formation of collective interests and the force of contemporary and place-specific circumstances. To date, research has found that a positive impact can be detected, though it ranges between weak/insignificant and limited and certainly not in any way replacing traditions forms (Christensen, 2011: 7). This suggests that the sense of belonging it offers is also correspondingly weak.

Yet on national and global scales, the internet is still very far from being as inclusive as networks based on popular cultural forms, with large sections of the population unable to participate online, as well as being denied access to an increasingly online cultural world.

*Re-activated cities?* If the public realms of 19th-century cities were deactivated in order to bring heightened discipline, order and control to their principal function as industrial production centres, what happened when Western cities *deindustrialised*? Attempts to replace jobs and income lost from manufacturing through an expanded service sector were only partially and temporarily successful and by the 1990s attention turned to cities rebranding themselves as cultural cities. In a process that reversed the 19th-century move, the high-tech, film, media, art, design and architecture small and medium sized enterprises looked for arts- and culture-rich environments in ethnically and culturally vibrant/activated cities such as London, Seattle, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Bilbao, New York and Manchester.

In most of these an alternative movement had pioneered new ways of living in abandoned industrial precincts and these became centres where artists and musicians could find studio, performance and market places to grow their enterprises. As Ley (1996) showed in the case of Camden Lock, London, a relatively small group could transform an entire deindustrialised area of inner London (turning it into a premier tourist site), providing a model for similar spontaneous eruptions elsewhere. This was a public realm 'reclaimed', and very often the same mix of elements was used – markets, street performance, carnival, fairs, political protest, theatre and ritual – drawn from their own popular cultural pasts, or cultural fusions in the now migrant-rich postcolonial city. As O'Connor

and Wynne (2000) showed for Manchester and Franklin (2016) for Bilbao, the spontaneous revival of popular culture was not easy to transplant to other places through policy transfer initiatives or architecture (Sennett, 2017), demonstrating that such revivals succeed most when they are driven by strong grassroots local engagement and their own 'cultural terroir' (Zukin, 2010). In almost all successful cases, certainly for Manchester, Bilbao and Hobart, men were active participants in the revival of their public realms.

In recent years, Manhattan has attracted attention as the single-person household capital of the USA (50.6% of all households), yet as Senior (2008) shows, many sociological studies have revealed Manhattan to have among the lowest rates of loneliness in the country. According to Cacioppo (2010), the reason for this has to do with 'a new sense of community, an increase in social capital and an increase in trust', though it also the case that many neighbourhoods of Manhattan are *culturally activated spaces*. Urban sociologists are beginning to realise that one of the most crucial processes of cultural efflorescence in cities is the extent to which it engages its local residents and provides them with a sense of belonging. As the annual centrepiece of a city's public realm, carnival also provides a good example of the connection between the public realm and a sense of belonging. The biographies of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, the Notting Hill Carnival and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras show, in each case, how carnival has provided the basis for inclusion and belonging for outsider or migrant groups, as well as an all-year-round focus for the communities themselves as they combine to make their floats and costumes, practise their music and performances. And as Bakhtin argued, it was largely, if not exclusively men who were responsible for (i.e. planned, rehearsed and choreographed) the medieval carnivals that occurred in every European town and rural district.

These studies show that developing culture and the arts in the public sphere is a promising new direction for cities and regions to address community participation and belonging and could be adapted to align with initiatives such as Men's Sheds. However, it is clear that loneliness research also needs to locate lonely men in the public realm, rather than the private social network, where such research might inform efforts to extend intervention and design supportive policy.

## Conclusion

We have argued that loneliness among Australian men has become a very significant problem that impacts on their mental and physical health as well as their full inclusion in Australian social life. New research must now penetrate the gendered life worlds of lonely Australian men so that evidence-based interventions and policies can be implemented. As the breadth of this article indicates, the challenge of tackling men's elevated rates of loneliness through the life cycle in a socially complex migrant society such as Australia demands much more focused qualitative research on the wider social bases of men's belonging and the embodied/emotional nature and performance of their relationships. Most research on loneliness has taken the form of sample surveys from which we have repeatedly seen that men are especially vulnerable, yet this research base consistently fails to deliver clear implications and direction for intervention and policy. We now need to direct research into the gendered life worlds of men beyond the accounting of social connection and support within the narrow confines of friendship and immediate

family circles in order to penetrate the cultural and performative changes in *ethnically specific* forms of belonging and thus 'unmet belongingness needs'. As the article suggests, research also needs to penetrate *both* more widely, into the domains of changing work, public spheres, wider kinship and neighbourhood social structures; and more narrowly, into the interpersonal performance of relationships, specifically, the practices of their making, affirmation and undermining. We have emphasised the dimension of time given over to these all-important qualities, and how contemporary loneliness relates to the creeping absence of strong and binding social relationships of all kinds in the neoliberal era, rather than their formal disappearance. To be sure, many surveys of the lonely report seemingly intact and fulsome social networks. We now doubt their capacity to protect individuals from loneliness.

The implications of analysis of the sociological foundations of men's belonging point to the need for a new wave of in-depth qualitative research. This must further investigate the life worlds and biographies of lonely men so as to locate them *within* the currents of social changes identified in the section on 'Freedom and belonging ...' and the changing gendered cultures of kinship and public realms (in the sections on 'Loneliness, gender cultures...' and 'Men's gender cultures ...'). Our analysis shows that the antecedents of an individual's loneliness are formed over long periods of transition, which is partly why causes of loneliness are so difficult to pinpoint, but also shows that biographical work offers a means of obtaining data on the shifting nature of belonging in time and space. However, the section on 'Loneliness, belonging and embodiment' suggests that other qualitative research needs to focus on moments of co-presence and the quality of pre-reflexive embodied interactions between the lonely and those they deem to be significant for their sense of belonging. Here comparative research between cohorts of the lonely and the not-lonely might be fruitful and augment other means of data gathering via diaries and online blogs.

Since men experience loneliness in different ways to women and find it more difficult to resolve, the most effective ways of addressing it must be tailored specifically to their experience and capacities. This article has probed more deeply into men's sources of belonging in relationships, in embodied and emotional transactions, in kinship systems, and in the public realm – both online and virtually. Throughout we have sought to develop an understanding of men's loneliness resulting from their distinctly gendered cultures and we have been able to identify aspects of their emotional, relational, familial and public lives that have rendered them vulnerable to loneliness and incapable of resolving it easily. We have identified what these begin to look like in specific instances, acknowledging that further permutations of distinction arise from ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, generation, class and nationality.

As we have argued, it is inappropriate to assume that a universal Western family or kinship structure applies to all Australian men, and national loneliness surveys have yet to figure ethnicity into their parameters. The Anglo-British bilateral and matrifocal kinship pattern had very specific gender cultures for men with structural implications for their sense of belonging and possibly pathways into loneliness. Yet we argued that this had been disrupted and reshaped in Australia, with consequences for the distribution and experience of loneliness. For example, while married men were still most likely to immerse themselves in the localities and family networks of their spouses, new forms of

belonging in mateship, with its origins in colonial forms of solidarity, meant that men's belongingness needs were significantly refocused around the spaces and relationships formed in workplaces. More recently these have broken down


As both rates of marital breakdown and the loss of traditional forms of men's work grew apace over the past 25 years, the bases of men's belonging through gender cultures were reduced, leaving them more prone to loneliness and less able to ameliorate it. Unemployment scattered former work cohorts that had been recruited through family connections, thus undermining two of the most important bases of men's sense of belonging. With unemployment and partnership breakdown impacting men more frequently (Flood, 2005), men were now no longer located in the supportive socio-spatial structures of matrilocal living or mateship. Their estranged wives were more likely to carry on life in the marital home, close to the supportive base of their maternal kin and friends, and they were far more likely to be given custody of their children.

Further research must develop and extend the work presented here in order to provide practitioners with the training and knowledge required to help lonely Australian men, and to give policy makers an understanding of how to address the social structural causes (and costs) of loneliness.

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