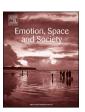Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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Loneliness and belonging in narrative environments☆

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness and belonging are often framed as psychological states affecting individuals. Their family, friendship, psychological mindset, and acquaintance networks are seen as important factors shaping experiences of loneliness and belonging, but the role of place, culture, and institutional environments are often relegated to the periphery of attention. This article adopts the lens of narrative environment to highlight the importance of environments and cultures in storying experiences of loneliness and belonging, in this instance, among students enrolled at a UK university. Focusing especially on student accommodation and the university's links (or perceived lack thereof) with its locality and the university's infrastructure, we argue for the dialectic and reciprocal relationship between students and their environment in storying experiences of loneliness and belonging. Narrative environment, we argue, encapsulates the way in which some people negotiate a sense of belonging, moving the focus beyond individual psychology and immediate social networks, to the impact of institutional and environmental culture.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that narrative 'give[s] meaning and mooring to life' (Bieger, 2015: 17). People's experiences are 'constituted through narratives', so that 'people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others', due to the available narratives through which people make sense of their experiences (Bieger, 2015: 20). Narrative is pivotal to how people construct, consolidate, and relate emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging. As an 'existential condition of being human', belonging and loneliness are mediated and enabled by narrative (Bieger, 2015: 17). As complex emotions, they are 'dynamic in time and "socially placed"' (Parr et al., 2005: 96; Fenton et al., 2012: 50). They are connected to place and space in ways that deserve to be seen through the lens of narrative, and narrative environment in particular. How exactly does narrative environment mediate and enable belonging, a complex emotion mediated by the experience of a storied sense of place?

This article addresses this question through the lens of student loneliness on a UK university campus. Studies on loneliness that include students typically focus on taxonomies and measurements of loneliness (Vaseileiou et al., 2019; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Janta et al., 2014), the health consequences of loneliness (Misirlis et al., 2020; Pijpers, 2017),

and psychological factors contributing to or exacerbating experiences of loneliness (Bhaiyat et al., 2018; Chow and Healey, 2008). The focus has been on the individual students, with the university environment and the narratives that circulate it of secondary consideration. This means that contributing factors to student's emotional experiences of loneliness which arise from narratives in the university environment have seldom been considered. However, it is precisely because students are those whose identity is partly defined by relating to a specific environment (the university) and its narratives that its impact on the emotions of loneliness and belonging is particularly salient and accessible.

Within the field of student geographies, scholars have commented on the impact of campus environments on student wellbeing, including everyday 'lifeworlds', focusing on leisure and living spaces off campus and on campus (Riley, 2010; Holton and Riley, 2013). Some of this research has also focused on the 'housing biographies' of students and 'student identities and homemaking' (Reynolds, 2020: 7; Holton, 2016; Chow and Healey, 2008; Fincher and Shaw, 2009). Others have focused more specifically on the emotional geographies of students, and the university (especially student accommodation) and students' experiences of home as 'transitory, multi-sited and open-ended' (Holton and Riley, 2016: 640; Worsley et al., 2021; Holton, 2017).

In this paper we argue for the importance of narrative environment as a theoretical approach for evaluating the significance of environmental factors influencing the emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging—in this instance, on a sample of students enrolled at a Russell Group university. Narrative environment encapsulates the way in which a public space such as a university constructs and circulates narratives that affect people's emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging (Austin, 2018, 2020). This extends from the physical, built environment, to more intangible aspects of university infrastructure, marketing, and the way in which the university environment becomes associated with certain types of student (in our Russell Group university, for example, students in our study noted the predominance of wealthy, white and young students) at the expense of including others within its narrative environment, or what Holton and Riley refer to as 'ideologies of what it is to be a student' (Holton and Riley, 2016: 633). This focus broadens the student geography literature by emphasising the interconnection of space and infrastructure in the emotional experience of narrative environments.

The article begins by discussing current approaches to the relationship between loneliness and belonging, before focusing specifically on this relationship in accounts of student experience. It then shows how narrative environment sits in a constellation of related attempts to highlight the importance of the environment in shaping emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging. After a discussion on methodology, the article analyses the different ways in which the narrative environment of the university affects students' reports of loneliness and belonging, with a particular focus on the built environment, university infrastructure, and the university's relationship with its locality. It will conclude by summarising the conceptual work that narrative environment can do for understanding emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging and their connection to narrative in general.

2. Loneliness and belonging

Loneliness has a complex and cyclical relationship with poor mental and physical health: it has been linked to diagnoses such as depression and high blood pressure and increased mortality risk, through a range of negative outcomes and mediators (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Although loneliness can occur in any context, it is predicted and heightened by experiences of inequality and exclusion, and by lack of access to vital infrastructures of belonging and community. Loneliness has a long history as a public health challenge to understand, prevent, and mitigate. Relatively few studies, however, have sought to connect loneliness explicitly with belonging, a feeling that loneliness has often been situated as oppositional to.

The traditional narrative has assumed that the less one feels one belongs anywhere, the lonelier one is (Theeke et al., 2015; Mellor et al., 2008; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In 1995, Baumeister and Leary postulated their 'belongingness hypothesis', which argued that 'human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships' (Baumeister and Leary, 1995: 497). Echoing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which he placed belonging third in importance after physiological needs and safety, lack of belonging leads to a sense of loneliness, isolation, and alienation (Hagerty et al., 2002). A 2015 study of 869 US undergraduates, for example, found that students who expressed a higher (unmet) need to belong also reported higher levels of loneliness (Pillow et al., 2015). To some extent this pattern is typical, and especially so for the students in this study, but this is not always the whole story. It is possible to experience loneliness or lack of belonging independently of the other - i.e. feeling lonely without feeling a need to belong as well, and there are instances when loneliness may be desirable and occasionally vital, in supporting opportunities to instigate new forms of belonging, or repairing broken connections (Qualter et al., 2015).

In the last ten years two studies in particular have sought to examine

the multifaceted nature of loneliness and belonging, and to connect these experiences to broader cultural/environmental themes. Building on Weiss (1973), Cacioppo et al. (2015) identified three main kinds of loneliness: intimate/emotional loneliness, relational/social loneliness, and collective loneliness, which was not originally identified by Weiss. Intimate and relational loneliness focus on the immediate contexts of someone's life: whether they have a significant other 'who provides mutual assistance, and who affirms one's value as a person', in addition to family and friendships, which form a 'sympathy group' (Cacioppo et al., 2015: 240). However, it is collective loneliness that intersects most closely with aspects of belonging that reach into narrative environment (Lim et al., 2021). Collective loneliness concerns voluntary associations, wider social networks, and connections on the peripheries of 'attentional space' (Cacioppo et al., 2015: 240). Collective loneliness is especially at stake in the university environment, which organises itself as a public space with thousands of people in its purview.

Allen et al. (2021) define belonging as 'a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places' (Allen et al., 2021: 88). These authors criticise the tendency in belonging research to focus exclusively on 'social belonging', which connects to relational loneliness – whether or not one feels one has a 'sympathy group'. Instead, Allen et al. highlight the importance of 'connection to place and culture', showing how an individual's competencies, perceptions, opportunities, and motivations intersect to create or thwart a sense of connection to place and culture (Allen et al., 2021: 89). This is a connection which is experienced emotionally. Place is experienced 'symbolically'; how one feels about place is connected to 'forms of knowledge that are grounded in intimate accounts of situations and events, which means that environments are not passive' (Fenton et al., 2012: 40; Pile, 2010).

This move beyond social belonging to an emotional 'connection to place and culture' considerably opens the field of loneliness and belonging scholarship to consider how loneliness and belonging operate and are experienced within a broader cultural and spatial affective zone that moves beyond an individual's psychology and their immediate relationships. It draws into focus the role of public places such as the university, to explore how these places limit or delimit opportunities, perceptions, and motivations to generate a sense of belonging. For example, what kinds of opportunities are available which might generate a sense of belonging? How might an environment influence whether someone feels they 'fit in'? Or how might a public place such as a university directly or indirectly shape people's motivations to connect? This article explores these questions from the perspective of narrative environment, arguing that narrative environment acts as a medium or conduit through which opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging are communicated, and that where these are negative, a sense of loneliness ensues.

3. Narrative environment

Narrative environments have been defined variously as 'contexts within which people talk and listen to each other' (Randall, 2016: 142), or as places where people are 'engaged through full-body, sensory stimuli' to negotiate a reading of a narrative that is essentially transactional, in that the meaning making process happens via a two-way engagement between person and environment (Austin, 2018: 154). Narrative environments enable organisations to 'communicate their stories through the physical environment. They may need to inform their communities; overcome social divides; develop their reputation; and increase visitor numbers or attract new audiences. Narrative environments also constitute a core part of "the global experience economy"' (UAL, 2021). While such environments communicate narrative through objects, images, text, and other sensory aspects, they also do so through 'affordances for the behaviour of the people in the space' (Austin, 2018: 156). The environment is therefore an active agent in the negotiation of

a range of narratives; 'any specific narrative environment will be experienced as "my," "our," "your," "their" world, depending on how you are addressed and positioned by the narrative environment' (Austin, 2018: 158). This positioning has crucial implications for either nurturing a sense of belonging via narrative environment or mediating experiences of loneliness. Universities – as key agents in the 'global experience economy' – should be seen as important shapers of narrative environments with an experiential impact on those who enter them, and – even before arrival – on who interprets these institutions as potentially hospitable and welcoming (or otherwise). We argue that the student body is not only a recipient or onlooker within these environments; students also shape and produce new narrative environments of their own, which are not always aligned with the institution.

As a concept, narrative environment owes a particular debt to theories of embodied perception developed by the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty and theories of space construction by Lefebvre (Austin, 2018). Merleau-Ponty argued that the way we experience the world is embodied; our 'body schemas' enable us to place ourselves in our immediate environment, through apprehension of depth, dimensionality, movement, tactility, and texture (Merleau-Ponty and Smith, 2005). Similarly, Lefebvre argued that there 'is no strict division between physical spaces and mental spaces but that all spaces are produced, lived and understood through relationships of power' (Austin, 2018: 159; Lefebvre, 1991). The key point here is to consider the narrative within the environment. Emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging are not simply caused by the physical or architectural shape of an environment, but through the way an environment constructs and circulates narratives that offer or inhibit qualitative affordances for experiences such as belonging. The narrative aspect of narrative environment means that it 'emerge[s] from feelings, and represent personal experiences that are socially constructed through language and other representational practices' (Fenton et al., 2012).

Other scholars have invoked cognate terms to discuss how the environment nurtures or circumvents belonging. Cheryan et al. (2009) describe 'ambient belonging', which 'includes fit with the material (e.g. physical objects) and structural (e.g. layout) components of an environment along with a sense of fit with the people who are imagined to occupy that environment' (Cheryan et al., 2009: 1046). Bathmaker (2021) has since developed Anthias's (2004) concept of narrative location to explore how becoming a university student involves placing oneself in social categories, which may also mean that narratives of location 'are also narratives of dislocation and alterity' (Bathmaker, 2021: 78). For new students, moving to university involves 'moving into a new social space, and obliges students to locate themselves in this new space' with possible consequences for feelings of loneliness and belonging (Bathmaker, 2021: 78). Such environments are not neutral. Students enter university environments which contain 'sedimented aspects of shared knowledge and meaning' that colour the kinds of narratives they encounter in these environments (Robinson, 2015: 140). Students must negotiate 'emotional capital' as 'the capacity to connect, involving acts, intentions and sentiments' (Silva, 2007: 145). By 'travelling-in-dwelling' and 'dwelling-in-travelling', students are exceptionally well-positioned as those whose emotions are brought into play as they seek to inscribe these upon 'home-spaces through place-making activities', but who may also feel prevented from doing this by the way in which a university seeks to 'story' student experience through materialising 'ideologies of what it is to be a student'. For Austin, narrative environments may be experienced instantly as 'mine', or may be perceived as 'yours', instilling feelings of isolation and non-belonging in the midst of experiencing 'throwntogetherness' (Holton, 2017: 9). The narrative environments in this study embrace the built environment and especially student accommodation, where notions of dwelling and being 'at home' are highly contested and influence perceptions of belonging, as well as university infrastructure which could set up unrealistic expectations in narratives of student experience.

4. The case study

This engaged research project sought to understand more about students' experiences of loneliness at a UK Russell Group university. Eight workshops were conducted with a student lived experience group, as part of a wider project on loneliness and community in higher education (see Cooper and Jones, 2022).

A total of 29 students were recruited through posters on campus, departmental mailing lists, and lecture announcements. The groups were composed of undergraduate and postgraduate students, with a mixture of ages, genders, disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and home or international status; each of these factors, alone or in tandem, could be considerable determinants of experience. All of the participants - bar three mature students - lived away from home, either in purpose-built student accommodation or in privately rented accommodation. For mature students, who are far less likely to significantly travel for study, a different relationship with belonging and place was in evidence. Feelings of alienation at university could be significantly pronounced, but were less likely to be compounded by a sense of geographical transience or 'passing through.' The project did not collect demographic data on background, minority status, age, or sexuality, anticipating that experiences of loneliness inflected by these factors would emerge as part of participants' narratives, as and where they were felt to be pertinent. In part, this arose from a concern with the stories that our students chose to tell about power, exclusion, and inequality, rather than narratives we as researchers might superimpose on or over their testimonies. Participants were informed beforehand of the purpose of the research, and what taking part would involve, and were provided with an outline of the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part. The work received ethical approval from the university's humanities ethics board.

In total there were eight 2-h workshops. Six of these were held before the Covid-19 pandemic, between October and December 2019. Two further workshops were held online in April 2020. The original six workshops had different students in each, with no students returning to later workshops (except the two on Covid-19). Each workshop followed an identical format, informed by one researcher's sociological practice and another's work as an oral historian. As rigorously designed and facilitated spaces where ideas (and evidence creation) are worked towards collectively, workshops were selected as a methodology which has an extensive history of producing rich data (Ahmed and Asraf 2018), and which was intended to make the experience of speaking about loneliness itself less isolating (Cooper and Jones, 2022). In this instance, students were engaged with a historical artefact (a questionnaire on student loneliness from the late 1940s), and maps of the campuses they used; these prompts were intended primarily to open up discussion, with participants responding to open-ended questions, many of which were extemporised by the researchers according to the direction of the conversation (Fisher et al., 2016).

In the final two online workshops, the facilitators focused on questions eliciting students' experiences of lockdown, being isolated, and moving between (or staying in) home and student accommodation. Workshops were audio recorded, transcribed, and anonymised for analysis. The following discussion draws on key themes identified by the project team; the lead author did not facilitate the workshops and joined the team for the analysis stage.

5. Narrative environment in the university

By the time students arrive at university, they have already begun to negotiate university narrative environments, through responding to marketing, visiting campus on Open Days, and by undertaking the admissions process. As occurred in this study, expectations about 'the student experience' affect the kind of narrative environment in which students situate themselves – and are situated - when they come to university.

5.1. The built environment and student accommodation

A particularly obvious and immediate university narrative environment impacting students' loneliness and belonging relates to their physical and psychological experience of place, through their accommodation and the affordances the built environment offers for a sense of collective and cultural belonging (Holton, 2017). One student summed up the dilemma faced by the restrictions on belonging imposed by university-owned student accommodation: 'you are either at uni or in your bedroom – with people or by yourself' (female, workshop 1). Even the presence of social spaces in student accommodation was no guarantee that students' sense of loneliness would be mitigated. Another student mentioned there being a 'social lounge' in their halls, 'which I thought was quite ironic […] I walked in and it was virtually always empty. There was no one there' (male, workshop 1). Ownership of space was identified as a key aspect of social areas in halls of residence, but this was often hard to achieve. The dichotomy of bedroom (whether in halls of residence or in privately rented accommodation) and campus (where teaching happens) seemed to dominate students' experiences. Students were also sensitive to the impact of learning spaces such as lecture theatres as places in which loneliness was experienced.

It is possible that halls of residence in particular are seen merely as places in which students pass through. Clarke (2005) has suggested that notions of 'travelling-in-dwelling' and 'dwelling-in-travelling' encapsulate the experiences of home for those 'on the move', who are not traditionally seen as obvious 'homemakers' (Holton, 2017). Applicable to residential students, which made up the majority of this study's sample, halls of residence need to be seen as dynamic spaces in which 'how home, for those on the move, hinges on the interplay between the moveable and the stuck, the material and the symbolic, the corporeal and the imagined' (Holton, 2017: 5). Halls of residences can therefore be read as 'micro-geographies' – spaces in which students' emotions are produced by the university in ways that are also storied, closely connected to students' perceptions of how being a student should feel and be like, and what should happen when (Holton and Riley, 2016). Loneliness and belonging thus seem imbricated in the negotiation of these temporal and spatial concerns. The shuttling back and forth from bedroom to campus illustrates the consequences of this narrative environment for loneliness and belonging. As one student reported: 'It is like living with a house full of ghosts' (male, workshop 1).

In any discussion of the interconnections of loneliness and belonging in the built environment – whether places of accommodation or other buildings – it is crucial to be attentive to how this environment can be experienced by people as more than simply bricks and mortar. Imrie (2019) explains that any environment 'may enable "specific engagements and circuits of exchange and attention"' (Imrie, 2019: 141). The limitations imposed on student accommodation mean it cannot be the kind of place one settles in permanently, and the students in this study recognised that university was quite distinct from their imaginary of home. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent public health measures enabled students to recognise that the university was not the same as 'home', because 'you're not in a work environment' when you are at home (female, workshop 7). The two workshops which addressed Covid-19 took place with participants who had returned to family homes, creating distance with the university environments which structured experience to such a considerable degree in the Autumn term of 2019. Nevertheless, where students live when they are at university influences their positive or negative experience of the broader narrative environment communicated through the built environment.

Many of the students in this study commented on their need for green spaces and the experience of nature, while at the same time observing how 'ugly' buildings fail to foster a sense of belonging on campus. Of one halls of residence, a student noted that 'It's like concrete towers, when I walk through it, is the feel you get from it. It's just these big flats and it's not really somewhere you want to hang out' (female, workshop 2). This student recognised that 'the environment really shapes how you interact

with people and things like that. It seems like a halfway place' (female, workshop 2). Another student reflected that 'if you are not happy and you are in a place that looks like … a POW camp or something, it makes you feel more depressed. I think the physical environment has an effect on you' (male, workshop 5). Boys Smith (2016) has argued that 'the place where we live or work has a profound effect on our wellbeing through its impact on our interactions with other people and on our feelings of being in control not just of our human interactions but of our wider environment' (Boys Smith, 2016: 7–8). This experience of feeling 'in control' of one's environment is made easier through spaces that facilitate what Ryff and Singer (2008) have termed 'environmental mastery'—a 'surrounding context that suit's one's personal needs and capacities', which enables one to reach environmental mastery (Ryff and Singer, 2008: 23). Given that the students in this study reported a high need for green spaces and nature in the university environment in order to mitigate feelings of loneliness, a narrative environment that recognises the importance of environmental mastery for people who engage with such an environment is critical.

Green spaces were understood by the students in this study to create a positive narrative environment in part because they helped them to feel calm and peaceful, and thus gain a sense of composure and even mastery over their situation. Particularly after dark, the association between green spaces and calm was distinctly gendered however, with female students raising concerns over physical safety and explaining how these placed considerable limitations on their social lives (see also Kuo and Sullivan, 2001). The ways that green spaces are positioned by some students as important to physical and mental wellbeing – for example, in the kind of stories that universities tell about their campuses – can guide and enhance students' positive reactions. One student noted that 'you don't have to be with someone, in nature, to feel like you're a part of something bigger […] nature kind of stands in for people there because you're like, "Wow. This is great. I feel really included in it"' (female, workshop 6). Another student reflected that 'It's so great because trying to disconnect yourself from everything around and walk for a minute by yourself, then you come back on campus with a completely different mind space' (female, workshop 5).

The aesthetics of an environment influence its narrative in part by connoting certain values. As with the student who (probably in jest) compared some of the buildings on campus to a prisoner of war camp, the physical environment matters because through aesthetic choices 'we make ourselves present […] they make us known to others and solicit their endorsement for what we are' (Scruton, 2013: xv). How does the university make itself present through its aesthetic and design choices? And what kinds of limitations does it place on students to enact 'small forms of resistance' by personalising their 'micro-environment' (Holton, 2017: 8)? For the students in this study, it is clear that some places on campus meet with a positive endorsement, but others, possibly because of their aesthetics and design choices and students' inability to resist these, do not, and therefore lose the capacity to nurture belonging, to 'feel included', as one of the students put it. Of course, students are by no means a homogenous group, and matters of aesthetics are always framed and inflected with cultural and historical contexts. Buildings which conferred a reassuring sense of history to white students, for example, had colonial legacies which meant that they could also be experienced as jarring reminders of exploitation and violence (Shaji, 2020). As one of the students in our study noted, a friend of hers from East Asia wondered whether her culture would be 'properly represented in this quite white university' (female, workshop 2); the question of what kinds of belonging are possible for students of colour amongst the architectural legacies of slavery and colonialism has to be a facet of the wider work of decolonisation (Arday and Mirza, 2018). University Infrastructure and Connection to the City.

Imrie has used the term 'affirmative infrastructure' to refer to ways in which organisational infrastructure is capable of fostering a sense of belonging and mitigating loneliness. 'People's ability to forge social networks depends, in part', argues Imrie, 'on infrastructure, ranging

from quality of computer networks enabling access to social media, to the physical design and siting of signage facilitating navigation in complex urban settings' (Imrie, 2019: 143). We might broaden this description to include the multiple, sometimes intangible ways in which organisations such as universities create opportunities to belong among its students, as well as how universities negotiate narrative environments that affect how students perceive whether they belong, and therefore impact their motivation to belong, as well as shaping students' perceptions about whether *other* students belong. If a university's infrastructure, for instance, embodies a narrative environment that tends to exclude certain demographics, or which sets up barriers to belonging outside its own infrastructure, then this is likely to cause feelings of loneliness.

The students in this study reported arriving at university already burdened with expectations about how their experience should pan out: it is supposed to be 'the time of your life', said one student (female, workshop 2). Another student recalled their assumption that they were 'going to have so many friends, it's going to be great'; but when this doesn't happen as expected, 'you suddenly think I'm doing something wrong, I'm messing this all up' (female, workshop 2). Even before students get to university in Freshers Week, the infrastructure experienced by students has encouraged them to arrive with certain, possibly unrealistic expectations, some of which were seeded at Open Day by student ambassadors. As one former student ambassador explained: At the [student ambassador] trainings they tell us that we need to talk about positive experiences […] I am not encouraged to speak about negative sides. (Female, workshop 5).

It is not surprising, therefore, that students in this study spoke of 'an expectation built up about university and it being the best time of your life but I don't think that really meets reality' (female, workshop 6). Such expectations are part of what Holton and Riley have referred to as 'ideologies of what it is to be a student' (Holton and Riley, 2016: 633). These ideologies are experienced as an affective narrative which is embedded in an environment that is 'transitory, multi-sited and open--ended'; 640). Where Holton has also spoken of the existence of 'housing biographies' for students, it seems important to stress that such narratives are already negotiated, sometimes uneasily, by students before they even move into halls of residence (Holton, 2016). Whether or not students take ownership of the housing biography presented to them as the established narrative for an optimum student experience has critical implications for loneliness and belonging.

Other students commented on the way the year structure – a key feature of university infrastructure which shapes its narrative environment – presented an unrealistic narrative of progression that they found hard to live up to. For example, one student noted that it 'Seems like everyone is so desperate the first couple of weeks, anyone you can, you form a bond with. And then you become very reluctant to meet anyone else' (female, workshop 2). Another student elaborated: 'I think when you go further into your studies, when you're in your second or third year, it's even more difficult to socialise because the other students have already established their own close circles of these very close friends' (male, workshop 2).

Part of the difficulty with the year structure links to the way in which student accommodation also changes with different year groups (Holton, 2016). The narrative environment at university encourages students to find a group of housemates for the second year very early on, often in the first term:

> there's so much pressure, because people just go, 'Well, have you got one? Oh well, I signed, and it was a cheap one, and it was close to campus, and you're not going to get one'. So, I think regardless of if you feel like you haven't got any friends, to then go and just shoe-horn yourself into a group that you maybe don't feel that you belong in, is really difficult as well. That is an accelerated pressure. (Female, workshop 4)

This pressure is made worse by perceptions of the university

narrative environment as excluding them from the heart of it: for these students in particular, either by age or class. One mature student commented that

> I feel like a leper on campus at times because it is based around a specific demographic, a specific age group largely. You get a few of us older ones trying to shuffle around the place and get from one step to another with sticks and things! There is no specific place for us as groups to go. (Male, workshop 5)

Another student commented on the way in which the environment is structured by class, which impedes a sense of belonging within its narrative: 'It is very evident, the divide between some people who have never really met people that don't go to private school or haven't lived that sort of lifestyle compared to people who like me went to a normal state school' (female, workshop 5). An international student also commented on the possible difficulties associated with different ways to be social at university and in different cultural backgrounds: 'You guys are having fun, I am lonely all by myself. What has happened in my life? It made me wonder' (male, workshop 1). For this student, his status as an international student had a significant bearing on how he interpreted the gulf in expectations between his sociability and those of home students, leading to him situating blame with himself.

In terms of class, international student status, and age, it is clear that in this instance, the university infrastructure plays a key role in shaping how the university narrative environment affords or constrains opportunities, perceptions, and motivations to belong. In the UK, these divisions are particularly salient in pre-1992 universities – including the institution at the centre of this case study – which are considered to be more elitist (Reay et al., 2013). As Walton and Cohen (2007) have argued, often 'members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of belonging' (Walton and Cohen, 2007: 82). While some older people and those from non-private-school backgrounds might not feel ordinarily marginalized or stigmatized, within the narrative environment in which they find themselves, it is possible that they feel marginalized (or perhaps more marginalized) while they negotiate it (see also Reay et al., 2013). These authors use the term 'belonging uncertainty' to describe how such people might experience environments in which they feel possibly stigmatized or marginalized. 'For members of socially stigmatized groups,' write Walton and Cohen, 'the question "Do I belong?" appears to go hand in hand with the question "Does my group belong?"' (Walton and Cohen, 2007: 94). For such groups who may perceive they are not expected to belong in a given place, their sense of belonging is fragile and this means that any set-backs or difficulties are interpreted as diagnostic of belongingness (or lack thereof). Students may thus question whether a narrative environment is 'experienced as "my," "our," "your," "their" world, depending on how they are addressed and positioned by the narrative environment' (Austin, 2018: 158). The students in this study who spoke out about feeling lonely or isolated on campus because they felt as if there was no place for them in the environment did so because they placed belonging within the contextual frame of this specific narrative environment. Universities as institutions can thus be experienced as *for* some people and not others, mirroring and perpetuating widespread structural inequalities beyond the academy.

This sense of isolation on campus itself can be exacerbated when opportunities to form attachments to the wider city community are not forthcoming, either because there are few opportunities to discover local activities and clubs, or because students see the university and its campus as the focus of their social, co-curricular activities. Some of the students in this research who had relocated for their studies expressed a wish to feel more connected to the wider community in the city. One student declared that 'there needs to be, at the university at least, signposting to things. There's lots of stuff going on, be involved in it. But obviously it's difficult to do if you don't know about it' (female, workshop 2). The lack of any obvious signposting in the university to civic or community initiatives means that, for some of these students at least,

'you're confined to be associated with other students, whereas who knows, in that space over there, there's a club run by locals for foraging' (male, workshop 2). Students are thus hearing a story communicated through the university's narrative environment that foregrounds university societies and other circumscribed socialising, and omits or overlooks narrative turns that might occur when social life is sought beyond the university. While university efforts to broaden students' horizons beyond the campus are not entirely absent, they are insufficient and lacking visibility. But then as one student noted, 'There is this pressure on university to provide stuff for students but at the same time it's probably better if you just involve the community' (male, workshop 2).

Apart from fulfilling these students' desire for nature and green things, becoming involved with the local community also presents an opportunity to form attachments and a sense of belonging that extends beyond the narrative environment of the university, with its year-structure and sense of movement, which ultimately ejects students out of that environment upon graduation. By contrast, engagement with the local area may bring students who relocated for their studies into contact with people who have chosen to settle and make a more long-standing home for themselves there. As Scruton puts it, 'Cities are made by their long-term residents, by the institutions and facilities that grow within their boundaries, and by the public-spirited benefactors who care for them as a home' (Scruton, 2013: xiv). Some of the students in this study expressed a real desire to come into contact with long-term residents: 'it's being out there with the people and I think that's a really cool idea in terms of loneliness because you are always part of something big and something really interesting and different and it's kind of changing almost all the time' (female, workshop 6).

University infrastructure and the university's connection to its locality are thus linked within its overall narrative environment. A university's location is often a key factor for students when making a decision about where to study, on the assumption that not all of a student's life at university will be taken up by the university. For some students, the need or desire *not* to relocate also plays a key role in deciding where to study. As a 'campus university', the institution we discuss in this case study presents some challenges that other universities which are scattered over a city may be less likely to face. Chief of these is the way the university infrastructure mediates and constrains students' opportunities to belong, how they perceive themselves in its environment, and how these two factors therefore motivate or demotivate them to find ways to belong at university.

6. Conclusion

Emotional experiences of loneliness and belonging are pivotal to the concept of narrative environment. If narratives really do give 'meaning and mooring to life' (Bieger, 2015: 17), then they do so only to the extent that one is able to place oneself within them, to dwell there and be at peace. This case study, focusing on students' experiences of loneliness and belonging at a UK Russell Group university has shown that belonging cannot be taken for granted in public narrative environments. Students are never simply 'students'; they are students of this or that university, and thus typically also residents of particular localities—all with their own narrative environments that foster emotional experiences of belonging or contribute to feelings of loneliness. Universities cannot assume that students will automatically position themselves and thus belong within its dominant narrative environment and its 'sedimented aspects of shared knowledge and meaning' (Robinson, 2015: 140), which is negotiated over time by students who may also experience uncertainty over belonging. At this university, being over a certain age or an international student, and having arrived from a state school mean that one's position within the university's narrative environment can be quite precarious.

The built environment is the most obvious way in which students experience the university's narrative environment, including options for accommodation and how students experience the aesthetics of the architectural design on campus and the values communicated through this. How the built environment is experienced can indicate the quality and values inherent in a given narrative environment: is this a place for being in, or is it a place that communicates transitoriness?

Similarly, the university infrastructure helps shape the narrative environment it is communicating to others. This involves the kinds of expectations students have about how their progress at university should unfold, but it also involves how the university positions students in relation to the wider locality. The students in this study expressed a wish to feel more engaged with residents in the city, to utilise clubs or activities that could bring students in touch with nature, and to experience non-student initiatives and lifestyles. This wish is arguably an indication that although students acknowledge they may be there only temporarily, they nevertheless wish to have a taste, perhaps for the first time, of how they might settle somewhere in the future.

Narrative environment is a dynamic phenomenon rather than something static and may in fact hold in play a multiplicity of narrative environments, some of which are competing against each other. Loneliness, especially for these students, was not simply about lacking social contacts or having an adequate 'sympathy group' (Cacioppo et al., 2015: 240). It extended to emotional experiences of cultural and collective isolation mediated by narrative environments, and a concomitant desire to belong to something bigger than their immediate situation: to feel part of their natural surroundings, and to be engaged with those who dwell where they also live.

For scholars in emotion studies, narrative environment represents a fertile concept that can help bring together interests in students' emotional geographies. As Kenway and Youdell argued in 2011, 'conceptualizations of emotion that are situated in the social, the discursive, the spatial and the affective offer a set of perspectives that have the potential to generate new understandings of emotion' (Kenway and Youdell, 2011: 132). Studying students' narrative environments enables a particular focus on the construction of students' emotions as they are experienced through the simultaneous interactions of space and time. Crucially, a focus on narrative environment invites attention to students' agency in navigating a range of university environments and infrastructure, and how their felt sense of agency contributes to feelings of loneliness or belonging at university.

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