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'From a guy's perspective'? Male students, masculinity and autobiographical loneliness narratives

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ABSTRACT

While student loneliness is increasingly visible on the research agenda, the relationship between gender and loneliness among students remains unclear. This article employs a feminist perspective on loneliness to interrogate the role of masculinity in shaping male students' experiences of loneliness at a UK Russell Group university. We argue that a feminist approach to male students' loneliness decentres masculinity as an explanatory and potentially pathologizing discourse for understanding their experiences of loneliness. Our analysis of male students' autobiographical loneliness narratives at university highlights a range of other factors shaping their experiences of isolation at university, such as transitioning to the university environment and navigating a range of ways to be social.

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Introduction

Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a key well-being issue affecting students in higher education. A 2017 Sodexo report found that 46 per cent of UK students admitted to experiencing loneliness during their time at university (Bhaiyat et al. 2018), while a 2018 survey conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) found that the 16–24 age demographic was the most at-risk group for experiencing loneliness (Barreto et al. 2021). In 2016, a YouGov survey of over 1000 students in the UK found that 34 per cent of respondents aged 18–24 'felt lonely fairly or very often to almost constantly' (YouGov 2016; Vasileiou et al. 2019, 22). These findings help shift the prevailing view that loneliness predominantly affects older people (Vasileiou et al. 2019; Barreto et al. 2022). Students are especially at risk of loneliness due to the mental and physical upheavals associated with the educational, social and geographical transition from school to university, with many moving considerable distances – including internationally – to live near or on campus. Loneliness among students has also been connected to students' experiences of accommodation and, as our previous research has identified, with

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connections (or lack thereof) to the wider community beyond the university (Vytniorgu et al. 2021).

When it comes to understanding the impact of gender on student loneliness the landscape is less clear. Early studies concluded that women were more apt to label themselves as lonely, but that men scored higher on loneliness measures that do not directly refer to loneliness, such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Borys and Perlman 1985; Schultz Jr. and Moore 1986). There is also evidence that men perceive loneliness as more stigmatizing and controllable than do women, in all age groups and across nations (Barreto et al. 2022). This perhaps reflects the longer pedigree of loneliness as a vocabulary of political complaint in modern feminism, in which loneliness is understood to be produced in part by external pressures and contexts, although this has been a more recent component of discourses in men's rights activism too (Coman 2020, 5). Studies have also suggested that gender will not 'completely explain sex differences in loneliness', but that the role of masculinity may adversely shape people's experiences of loneliness (Cramer and Neyedley 1998, 647; Ernst et al. 2021). A meta-review of 79 studies published between 1978 and 2018 concluded, among other things, that men seem reluctant to discuss emotional issues (including loneliness), that lonely men may be more likely to engage in risky or unhealthy behaviour and that feeling 'insufficiently masculine' can result in loneliness (Ratcliffe, Galdas, and Kanaan 2020). In short, there is a large and sustained body of research which has studied men's mental health experiences and delineated correlations between masculinity, experiences of mental health challenges such as loneliness and help-seeking behaviour (Ernst et al. 2021). There is evidence to suggest that men and women both experience loneliness, but attribute causation differently, and explain and respond to the experience in different ways (Helm et al. 2018). Yet in spite of this recognition of complexity, masculinity remains a key concept for understanding men's experiences of loneliness and how they narrate and respond to this, especially for older men, who have often been the focus of loneliness research more broadly (Ratcliffe, Wigfield, and Alden 2021). Encompassing evidence from mature students, our work discerned no clear or easy generational shift in men's willingness to open up, although this has been noted as a process of cultural change elsewhere (Haggett 2015).

However, we wish to question the centrality of masculinity as a central explanatory framework for understanding men's narratives of loneliness, particularly in higher education settings. We are not arguing for the abandonment of issues of masculinity, but rather for a recognition of the intersectional nature of men's experiences. Where some have argued in general that 'we must look beyond masculinity to consider intersections of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, world religion and so on, in order to explain the health of particular groups of men' (Gough, Robertson, and Robinson 2016, 135), we apply this qualification specifically to a study of male students' narratives of loneliness in a UK Russell Group university. Drawing on insights from feminist loneliness studies, we aim to shift the debate about men's loneliness in higher education away from an individualist, deficit model (Christou and Bloor 2021), which is underpinned by the medical model of disability (Magnet and Orr 2022) and framed by a preoccupation with longed-for social connection as opposed to objective lack of social contact (Perlman and Peplau 1981; Cattan et al. 2005). This is further perpetuated in the logics of techniques for measuring loneliness, such as the UCLA and De Jong Gierveld loneliness scales (Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona 1980; De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2010). Instead, we draw focus to the 'continual entwinement' of self and structural, institutional practices that make loneliness a cultural

as well as an individual experience (Wilkinson 2022, 25). We follow, therefore, Denise Riley's injunction

never to overlook or misread gender in its manifestations while also not allowing it to hang like a veil to filter every glimpse of the world; as if we perceived all of it in advance; as if being women or being men produced, out of that very distinction itself, exhaustively distinctive lives. (Riley 1987, 269)

Indeed, we recognize the importance of intersectionality in male students' lives, and the ways in which male students negotiate a range of different identity facets beyond their gender, including their position as students in the neoliberal university (Nichols and Stahl 2019). While universities and higher education policy organizations have increasingly devoted attention to understanding and addressing student loneliness and how this may affect health, well-being and the student experience, contributions have often been framed in the individualistic language of student retention, thereby further emphasizing students' primary position as consumer (Nwosu et al. 2021; Neves and Brown 2022).

The article begins by exploring perspectives on men, masculinity and (student) loneliness, highlighting the value of narrative as a tool for exploring male students' experiences of loneliness from a feminist perspective. After a brief methodological comment, we explore male students' opening up about loneliness on campus, and how they cope with the transition to university and a variety of ways to be social. We then briefly indicate how the pandemic impacted these students' experiences of loneliness. It concludes by highlighting the need for further studies on men's health (including its mental and social components) and well-being in higher education to consider a multiplicity of factors shaping their experiences in addition to masculinity.

Men, masculinity and autobiographical narratives of (student) loneliness

A feminist perspective on men's loneliness would seek specifically to contest and transcend approaches that pathologize and individualize men's loneliness as something inherently amiss with the male sex in general (Borys and Perlman 1985), or which create an image of 'the lonely male' as a social problem (Schultz Jr. and Moore 1986), cultural scripts which contribute to the burden of shame around loneliness and have enjoyed an extensive afterlife (Ernst et al. 2021). It would also, we suggest, take a critical approach to attributing men's loneliness to defects associated with masculinity. In recent years there has been an explosion of research seeking to explore the relationship between cultural ideals of masculinity, and men's health and well-being (Courtenay 2000; Matthews 2016; McKenzie et al. 2018). This work typically takes the position that 'the doing of health is a form of doing gender' (Saltonstall 1993, 12), and that by 'dismissing their health care needs, men are constructing gender' (Courtenay 2000, 1389). In this line of thought, men are perceived to be emotionally reticent and careless about their health because they are in thrall to damaging notions of what 'being a man' is all about.

Behind these ideas lie diverse influential theories of masculinity, such as Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, and Anderson's theory of inclusive masculinity, and we recognize that in some instances it is more germane to speak of *masculinities* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Robinson 2008; Matthews 2016; Anderson and McCormack 2018). In his critique of the way in which Connell's hegemonic masculinity thesis has

been appropriated by research on men's lives, Matthews (2016) has proposed moving beyond simplistic or reductive accounts of men's mental health as being driven by poorly defined notions of hegemonic masculinity. Other dimensions of men's lives, as well as other social identities, need to be considered, such as age or life circumstances, that shape the way in which men negotiate their health and well-being.

Research on men's experiences of higher education has typically followed the general pattern of work on men's health by exploring men's negotiation of masculinity norms specifically within the university or college environment (Di Bianca, Martin, and Mahalik 2021). Focusing on the way in which male students access counselling or well-being services seems particularly problematic from a feminist perspective, as it situates male students within a neoliberal context in which help-seeking behaviour is pathologized in an educational culture obsessed with student retention and 'outcomes' (Wiseman, Gutfreund, and Lurie 1995). For example, male students' reluctance or 'failure' to talk about mental health problems has long been interpreted as an issue of gender role conflict (Ernst et al. 2021), in which experiencing loneliness and the possible mental health difficulties with which it can be associated is interpreted as a difficulty due to the desire to adhere to masculinity norms, preventing a man from successfully opening up about their well-being (Blazina, Settle, and Eddins 2008, 75; Gough, Robertson, and Robinson 2016). Other research in this area has explored the way in which male students' masculinity has contributed to the formation of intimidating 'laddish cultures' on campus (Phipps 2017), while also helping to build the 'traditionally heterogendered institution' that marginalizes LGBTQIA+ students (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans 2021). Discussions around the 'traditionally heterogendered institution' also intersect with wider conversations which position health, well-being and student experience at the centre of higher education policies and provision (Bristow, Cant, and Chatterjee 2020).

While this research has increased the visibility of some of the negative impacts of some male students' performance of gender on student well-being and the broader 'student experience', it also, at times, seems overly reliant on reductive theories of masculinities to interpret male students' opinions and behaviour on campus; even as it simultaneously seeks to critique them. Drawing from feminist loneliness studies and its suspicion of individualized deficit models of loneliness, we explore the richness of male students' voices when discussing loneliness at university. While some of our students' voices are at times self-reflexive about 'being a guy' and what that means for their well-being, the vast majority offer multifaceted narratives of loneliness that shift the focus beyond the so-called deficits of masculinity. We recognize that 'any individual man will experience a range of situations and relationships and in some contexts will take up more powerful positions at certain times, then be placed in subordinated or marginalized positions at others' (Gough, Robertson, and Robinson 2016, 135). De-centring masculinity as an explanatory framework for interpreting male students' autobiographical narratives of loneliness, therefore, aligns with recent attempts to emphasize the intersectional nature of men's experiences, especially when paying attention to men's effect (Gough 2018). As an experience which can be experienced emotionally, loneliness for male students intersects with multiple areas of their identity, with masculinity a part but not the whole of this.

Partly for this reason, we highlight the value of narrative as a way for students to explore the diversity of their experiences of loneliness at university. As Christine Stephens has argued, narrative-based analysis 'is not a method as such, but a theoretical approach to

interpreting talk' (Stephens 2011, 63). At one level, narratives are storied accounts of experience – 'ontological' narratives used to make sense of ourselves (Somers 1994). On another level, they are more than this: they can be a 'pervasive structure with which we convey and comprehend the experiences and meanings of events, account for our own and each other's behaviour, or reveal ourselves to others in the way in which we would like to be seen' (Stephens 2011, 63). Autobiographical narratives do not reveal an 'essential' self (Bartel 2020). Rather, they suggest variation across time and context, and are often used by people to negotiate a position in a world that is in itself subject to flux and change.

Autobiographical narratives draw on available social discourses and use tropes, imagery and symbolism that make sense within the specific context(s) in which the speaker locates themselves. Feminist perspectives have long been interested in autobiographical narratives, but within the field of loneliness studies, they offer 'a counterbalance in a society increasingly hungry for and reliant on positivist measures of wellness' (Sagan 2019, 98). In line with our interest in the richness and diversity of male students' loneliness narratives, we consider narrative an approach that can help move the focus away from 'individualistic and medicalized notions of responsibility' to exploring the 'interactional, social and cultural embeddedness' of male students' narrativized subjectivities (Sagan 2019, 91).

The study

This exploration of male students' autobiographical loneliness narratives originated as part of a wider study of student loneliness at a UK Russell Group university conducted in 2019 and 2020 (Vytniorgu et al. 2021). A total of 29 students across six separate dates – a mix of male and female, undergraduate and postgraduate – took part in one-off, non-sequential, structurally identical workshops with a male historian and a female sociologist, exploring what loneliness means for students at university, and how this maps itself specifically onto university campuses. 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. This does impose certain limitations in terms of replicating methods, generalisability and the possibility of further consolidating participants' responses.

In these workshops, students were asked to explore historical sources on student loneliness, and collectively discuss maps of the university's campuses, and their responses were recorded on a Dictaphone. During the first national Covid-19 lockdown, in spring 2020, a further two workshops were conducted online, to explore the impact of the pandemic on students' well-being. Unlike previous workshops, these invited students from the first cohort to return to the study. This was then followed up by an online journaling project, in which students wrote and reflected on each other's experiences of lockdown (Cooper and Jones 2022). The following is a close reading of the original discussion workshops, which were transcribed and anonymized. Contributions from the 8 male students were isolated and then analysed collectively by the current authors. We opted for a grounded epistemology, 'whereby the stated perspectives of the interviewees drove the content of the study' (Ratcliffe, Kanaan, and Galdas 2022, 2).

We also recognize that the workshop facilitators were not neutral bystanders in the generation of these autobiographical loneliness narratives, participating in the flow of conversation in spontaneous and iterative ways, and bringing our own set of

preconceived ideas and interests to the table. As researchers in the medical humanities and social sciences, our questioning reflected our interest in the historical, cultural and institutional determinants of loneliness. The workshops facilitated ‘an interchange of views [among people] conversing about a theme of mutual interest’ (Kvale 1999, 101). The facilitators therefore encouraged participants to ‘try out possible plots in collaboration, seeking to create narratives that make meaning to everyone involved’ (Reed, Josephsson, and Alsaker 2020, 2). The dynamics of the workshops – and the responses that male students gave – are likely to have been inflected by the composition of participants, with a considerably higher number of female participants in each group (McKenzie et al. 2018). The discussion nature of the workshops was also a deliberate attempt to move beyond the policy-facing origins of this research, specific to the institution we are part of, to theorize more broadly the gendered implications of these discussions on loneliness and belonging.

Building on a grounded epistemology, the analysis follows a literary-based concept of close reading, which pays attention to language, imagery, narrative devices and the development of authorial voice (Bartel 2020). Read as autobiographical loneliness narratives, these texts represent a corpus of writing that demonstrates the irreducibility of these male students’ experiences to individualized notions of masculinity. They demonstrate the agency of these men in discussing their loneliness and well-being experiences, and how these intersected with their wider positionality as a student at university.

‘I am talking about my experience’: The complexities of ‘opening up’

By inviting students to contribute on a potentially altruistic – but not necessarily experiential – basis, care was taken to compose an atmosphere where shame over loneliness was severely reduced, and speaking about difficult feelings was, in Lee Oakley’s words, ‘contextually appropriate’, while still emphasizing how we were considering loneliness in its broader social, physical and psychological realm, rather than as an individualistic pathology (2020, 28, emphasis added). The context of the workshops enabled the students to open up about opening up, something that they felt was risky or unthinkable in other circumstances.

Reflecting on their experiences of trying to make friends at university, some of the students located a range of factors affecting this process. One student recognized that living alone might actually provide the opportunity to learn ‘what makes you tick’, and that the ‘person that you are might not even be the same person a year down the line’, which makes forming friendships a longer-term process with no quick fixes (workshop 1). Another student in the first workshop was perceptive about the way the short length of time to complete the degree meant that it was difficult to ‘cherry pick the people who fit with you most. It is assumed it is going to be instant and often if you are going to find the most profound friendships they do take a lot of time. I am talking about my experience’ (workshop 1). In the second workshop, students reflected on how the existence of seemingly established friendship groups often proved a barrier to forming new friends, either because of social anxiety or because it is often difficult to know how others are thinking about you. For the student who disclosed an anxiety disorder, ‘there’s always this concern about being an intruder in that situation and not being welcome’ (workshop 2). This also meant that he generally had a low estimation of himself (‘the default mindset I have is that everybody there hates me’), while recognizing

that in some situations he might need to 'keep on going because you're going to have to fake it until you make it', which suggests the recognition that it might be important to overcome the limits of his social anxiety to allow for his fundamental social needs to be met (workshop 2) – finding a balance between the needs related to his social anxiety and those related to feeling lonely. While this response could be interpreted as a behaviour aligned with hegemonic masculinity, such as feigning confidence, it seems clear from this narrative that the student's response is in fact a recognition of the student's social anxiety, which the student seems to interpret as something to engage with actively, even if this sometimes means appearing to 'fake it'. Another student used the discussion space to open up about a history of abuse and trauma, which resulted in difficulties being 'touchy feely': 'all of a sudden that puts me outside of the relationship zone, that puts me outside of the friendship zone, because I don't open up'. This student in particular recognized the interplay of personal and social factors and saw that people who have 'experiences in the past which stop them from being able to present themselves in the way in which they want to be' may find it harder to navigate a specific social context in which the expectation seems to be that it is important to make friends' (workshop 2).

In the fourth workshop, another student narrated his experience of dysthemia, which he described as a 'persistent depressive disorder'. But while this student related difficulties because of this condition, he was also self-reflective about the realities of masking it, with neither side (masked or unmasked) deemed the better. While this student reported having friends, he felt that there was also a time and a place for opening up about his relational difficulties and mental health. This reflection then fed into a discussion about the possible contexts in university in which you might open up about these difficulties, representing a self-conscious awareness of being part of an institution that is ostensibly concerned about students' mental health and well-being, but where services do not directly address loneliness. As one participant recognized, there's 'lots' of support, but for him he felt that 'you go to different people and you open up, and it's like self-harm. It's like, "Oh for fuck's sake, not again,"' (workshop 4). This student seemed to find the university's well-being provision inadequate in the sense that it lacked the specificity needed for him to really relate to someone. Responding to this comment, another student reflected on his experience of going to a support group where there are people 'who have completely had a mental breakdown and are just completely ruined [...] I don't connect to it' (workshop 4). This might reflect the fact that there is no university service specifically supporting loneliness, with the only help route being services that cater for mental and physical health. In fact, referring in particular to the experience of loneliness, a participant stated that it could be 'painful to open up and talk to those people, just going to a stranger' (workshop 4). This student was especially aware that the kind of support provided by professional well-being services, even at university, might be too generic, representing a more cynical attempt to 'tick' a box, providing a service as part of an institutional strategy in which these services are not intended to meet loneliness related needs, only if and when these become associated with physical or mental health difficulties (workshop 4). Even with friends rather than a professional mental health service, discernment could still be necessary when it came to opening up: 'I don't want to bother them because they already have a lot going on on their plates. They probably already have anxieties and bits and pieces of their own that they want to prioritize because it's their own health' (workshop 4).

There might therefore be a weighing up or balancing of 'costs and benefits' when it comes to opening up about loneliness. Not wanting to overload your friends with personal problems, or risk rejection, had to be balanced with the difference in interaction dynamics between opening up to your friends and opening up in institutional contexts that might be perceived as simply offering a tick-box service, or even a service that does not match the needs of someone feeling lonely. While these students were discussing their personal experiences of mental health and social difficulties 'from a guy's perspective', it is clear that their framing of their experiences at university went far beyond any simplistic attribution of difficulties in opening up to some kind of hegemonic masculinity. While these students disclosed personal experiences that they felt impacted their experiences of loneliness, such as social anxiety, these were also put in the context of being a student at university and meeting the various expectations associated with this social role, such as making friends and maintaining a friendship group that can support your mental health and social needs while you complete your studies. This shifts the emphasis away from the image of 'the lonely male', to an embedded narrative of multi-faceted male students who at times experience loneliness, but who place this within a broader context of navigating life, sociality and friendship at university.

'This sort of place': transitions and ways to be social

For the students in our study, discussing loneliness at university encouraged comment on the nature of the university as a place in which to be social, and how transition to university shapes perspectives on being sociable at university. The men in our study storied their experience of transition as one of trying – and sometimes failing – to meet expectations of what life at university should be like, in terms of academic and social expectations. One participant explicitly drew out the institutional nature of the transition, and related expectations by describing the move to university as 'a pivotal life-changing moment when you come to this sort of place'. He notes that 'it's sold as a community', for example in recruitment brochures and open day activities, but 'so far, I've not really found that' (workshop 4).

Another student, in the first workshop, specifically focused on the transition element, connecting his university experiences of being social with his life before university:

I guess it is that time in your life where it is the first time you have had any real independence. I know definitely for me growing up, I did have it quite easy. I had a good nuclear family, everyone got on really well, I went to a good school and it is the first time for me coming here it was a bit like, okay, maybe everything isn't quite so rosy. Even if at any point – obviously this won't be true for everyone, but if there was [sic] ever issues with school it was really easy to get home and then everything is fine ... When you come here, it is like your whole life isn't so compartmentalised as it is like home and school. It all blends into one here and I think that can be a bit overwhelming (workshop 1).

Adopting an autobiographical stance ('I know for me growing up'), this student seemed to be framing his transition in terms of navigating different spaces, associated expectations and actual offerings, and what these could and could not provide for him. Growing up, home and school were 'compartmentalized', as he phrased it, so that if something bad at school happened, he could be sure that he could go home and receive reassurance. At university this is no longer the case; effectively home and school 'all blends into one here', which seemed overwhelming. His reflections focused on the nature of the place that university represents. Feeling 'overwhelmed' was not internalized as a personal

failing – still less reducible to his masculinity – but as a natural response to a new and unfamiliar space requiring different ways of managing life.

A key factor in these students' narratives of transition to 'this sort of place' was organized around navigating a variety of ways to be social, including 'spend[ing] time among other people, like in a common area of your halls or in a flat watching TV or something like that' (workshop 1). In the second workshop, a student reflected on the contemporary role of the internet in mediating people's sociality: 'with social networking and being able to talk to people you're not even physically in the same continent as, I think that puts the ideas of loneliness and friendship in a completely different light' (workshop 2). This comment also highlights the way in which the students in this study distinguished between being alone and being lonely, where being alone should not simply be taken as an indication that a person is lonely – a common conflation that is also at the root of expectations of communalities at university.

For international students, however, the situation can be more complex. One participant in the first workshop shifted into story mode, using past tense, scene setting and narrative sequencing to describe how when he was in his first year. He initially bonded well with his flatmates:

They invited me to the parties, but, after week 5 or 6 they stopped doing that. At the time it became so confusing because in the country I came from, people like me is [sic] more likely to be invited to the party [...] Then they stopped inviting me and sometimes I was in my room listening. They are shouting in the kitchen and this kind of stuff is really annoying. You guys are having fun, I am lonely all by myself. What has happened in my life? It made me wonder (Workshop 1).

This student reflects on how others stopped including him, but also on how he did not take the initiative to join uninvited. Quite quickly he goes from observing how he felt excluded to reflecting on how he might be partly to blame, a narrative that can be helpful in identifying what he can do to overcome the situation, but it can also be unhelpful in that this might be mistargeted, if the invitations stopped deliberately. His story prompted him to reflect openly about his experience: 'How can I be one of them?' he asked.

That is a problem I was thinking at that time. How can I be one of them? They are having a party and I should be in there because we are under the same roof, but sometimes it is so confusing for me whether or not I should join them because it is quite easy (workshop 1).

This student's reticence to join his flatmates' parties and his feelings of loneliness were linked to his hesitancy around acceptable or expected patterns of behaviour in this culturally new social situation. This man made it clear that in other situations and places (such as his country of origin), he was usually sociable in ways that for him are contrasted with feeling lonely. In this way, this student's experiences at university were not an 'individual deficit' which needs to be pathologized as a psychological defect, but partly a result of exclusion, and partly embedded in a response to a new cultural situation which lay to a large extent beyond his control, even though he noted at the end that 'it is quite easy' to join his flatmates. His experience of loneliness was therefore intersectional, in which his cultural difference intersected with exposure to new social expectations of life in a new institutional culture.

But what about being a male student specifically? In the second workshop, a discussion about coping with difficult days, where you seem to lose your self-confidence, prompted

two students to reflect on this from an explicitly male perspective. But even here, it seems difficult to interpret these students' narratives from an angle that focuses centrally on these students' masculinity. One man began by saying 'from a male point of view, it's very different' coping with difficult days. But then he shifts the focus to talk about low self-esteem more broadly. He speaks of being

reluctant to ask people about what they think of you or whether or not they like you, even. Whether to ask them genuinely, 'What do you think of me?' because I think there is definitely a barrier between being emotionally open and trying to alleviate this self-esteem issue (workshop 2)

It is true that this student interpreted this challenge from the starting point of his sex, but the overall context of the conversation, in which both male and female students were discussing the difficulties of opening up about bad emotions which are contingent on difficult days (rather than more prolonged challenging experiences), means that in a sense this student was simply saying that, while his own experience may differ from that of the woman who had just spoken, it was nevertheless an experience of low self-esteem that may be shared by the other participants in the room, regardless of – but not wholly divorced from – matters of gender. Emotional openness, here, was constructed as something which many if not all members of the group faced considerable barriers around.

Equally, the student who spoke next and said, 'from a guy's perspective, you have a preconceived idea of what you want to present yourself to be', was not primarily reducing this idea to a facet of masculinity – although his self-awareness as a 'guy' was relevant – but locating a point of shared thinking with the rest of the students in the workshop, male and female. The central point which the students were talking about is that after a difficult day in which one's self-esteem has been knocked, it can be difficult to be emotionally candid even with friends. If one is candid about one's difficult day and lack of self-esteem, then friends might say something 'that's completely different' to how one imagines the situation and oneself within that. The risk here is that 'you lose your own identity and that in itself can be quite traumatising' (workshop 2). This seems to be an additional issue of ways to be social, and how to relate to others in differing circumstances.

The fact that the students were able to talk about experiences of loneliness and experiences of being social in the context of their life at university means that their narratives are also cultural ones, emphasizing their position as students with a set of culturally-specific expectations about how to behave at university. While many of the students spoke candidly in the workshops about their own lives and past experiences, these were elicited through discussion on the wider cultural and intersectional aspects of being a student at university and the challenges that students seem collectively to face. This shifted the focus away from individual psychological deficits, towards a collective imagining that emphasized 'the interactional, social and cultural embeddedness' of these students' experiences (Sagan 2019).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic – and decisions made around its governance – have significantly impacted higher education students (Cooper and Jones 2022). Particularly in the early pandemic, familiar educational routines were disrupted and living arrangements

altered, with some students confined to their bedrooms or student flats, and regular face-to-face contact with others in the university severely curtailed. For the students in our study, the pandemic enabled them to shift perspective on feelings of loneliness:

We're all forced into this situation, and I feel that's an issue of loneliness. People from all backgrounds, regardless of where you come from, they can experience feelings of loneliness. And when everyone's in the same situation, I feel it's making ... we all feel a lot more together in the sense of isolation (Workshop 7).

For this student, the pandemic had helped adjust perspectives on loneliness: it was no longer necessarily an individualized experience (although even before the pandemic, this was called into question by our student participants), but tied more openly to context and events. As one student said, the pandemic has 'made people be more aware that it's okay to feel a bit lonely sometimes, it's created a bit more awareness' (workshop 7). Of course, experiences of loneliness have always been structurally and politically framed and inflected, but experiences of mass quarantine normalized isolation at least briefly – in ways that worked against a shaming, privatized vision of loneliness as a signifier of social or emotional failure.

In the final workshop, students wondered about the use of the pandemic in helping to shift institutional cultures at university, particularly where they were thought to privilege extroverted students over introverted ones. 'I think it's an issue of university culture favouring extroverts', said one man, 'the kind of activities that are there, the environment. People's image of university is really just what an extrovert experiences' (workshop 8). This insight represented a germination of thoughts seeded in the pre-COVID workshops, where expectations of what it meant to be social were negotiated by students as they transition to university and experience a different mode of connecting study and social life. For this student, the adjustments that were required by the pandemic seemed a positive step to shift the focus to changing institutional culture rather than catering only for the social needs of the more socially confident and extroverted students. The pandemic had helped create awareness of the cultural or systemic nature of what might previously have been reduced to matters of individual difference. In other words, the pandemic led to more structural responses to isolation, which made external or situational drivers of loneliness more visible or obvious. The fact that the university may encourage a particular form of sociability means that this is something that can be collectively contested, subverting the neoliberal conceit that students should take responsibility for managing their own well-being.

Conclusion

Building on the abundance of research on the relationship between men's health and masculinity, we propose a feminist approach to the study of men's experiences of loneliness that can de-centre masculinity as an explanatory framework for understanding men's loneliness. It can do this by contesting the narrative of the lonely male at the mercy of a pathological form of masculinity which is individualized within specific males. As Gough, Robertson and Robinson argue, 'we should not assume that all men are poor at looking after themselves', or that any difficulty men have with speaking about their health and well-being can be explained by recourse to hegemonic masculinity (2016; Matthews 2016).

The male students in our study narrated complex relationships with their mental health and with feelings of loneliness. But this was not often related to masculinity. To be sure, we are not claiming that men and male students can never experience gendered reluctance to discuss feelings of loneliness. Rather, we have sought to place gender within a cluster of other important factors shaping these men's experiences of loneliness. Loneliness was, on the whole, framed as a contingent experience associated with transition to the new environment of university, exploring multiple ways of being social made relevant by this new context as well as by the pandemic, and increasing awareness of the role institutional welfare services play in addressing students' well-being. These students placed well-being services among a matrix of other possible ways of addressing difficult emotions or experiences, including talking with friends and family, and not always the best way, particularly when it comes to loneliness. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic enabled these students to reflect more explicitly on the way the university culture communicates certain images of success (associated with images of extroverted, students, for example). The culture in which they found themselves was no longer a 'given', whose role in structuring experiences of loneliness remained obscured or naturalized.

These findings are of particular importance to student unions, well-being services, pastoral support services and finally for male students themselves: they emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of male students' experiences of loneliness in the complex institutional culture of a university. While 'laddish' cultures certainly exist on campus, there was little evidence of this in our workshops, although this may also have reflected the diversity of masculinities in different situations. Pastoral support services, especially those based in halls of residence, should be particularly sensitive to the intersectional nature of male students' experiences of being social, with particular attention paid to international students, who might feel uneasy when confronted with different cultural expectations and might tend to blame themselves.

Further work on male students' health and well-being at university has to address masculinity within specific histories, environments and contexts, considering the various intersecting roles and identities students negotiate at university. Focusing on a greater diversity of male students would also be beneficial. Our study was limited to self-selecting students at an elite Russell Group university. Understanding the loneliness experiences of male students of different ethnic and class backgrounds who attend different kinds of university, as well as those who primarily live at home, would strengthen intersectional analyses of male students' experiences of loneliness at university. 'Loneliness is political', as Wilkinson says (2022, 35). There can be no doubt that gender plays a significant part in how broader structures and ideologies etch themselves on the feelings and experiences of male students. But it is by no means a monocausal relationship, or even the most central part.

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