The Phenomenology and Psychopathology of Feeling out of Place

Submitted by ***Lucius Shaun Tan***, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in *Philosophy*, *May 2024*.

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Dedication

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To all the seekers,

now and forevermore,

trusting your instincts,

doing the unexpected,

and finding the others.

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Abstract

The drive to belong is one of the fundamental hallmarks of the human lived experience. As we make our way through life, we find a great many of life's most cherished moments are those shared (i.e., experienced together) with others who matter to us. Indeed, the social world affords us a multitude of opportunities to have our needs met and desires satisfied. From time to time, however, the vicissitudes of life pummel our homelike existence, rendering us afraid, lonely, and unwell. Unable to maintain our grip on the social world, circumstances compel us to respond in certain ways. In the attempt to find our feet again, we rely on environmental cues and sociocultural norms to lift us up and propel us forward. Possibilities for overcoming life's struggles are mediated by access to the right resources (existential goods) and opportunities for action. When lack or loss of access jeopardizes our lifelines, we encounter the world in a diminished and distorted form. As a result, withdrawal from the social world is a common adaptive response to what can be described as "feeling out of place": an unshakeable sense that somehow you do not matter and therefore do not belong. Absence of belongingness is associated with several adverse mental health outcomes, highlighting cause for concern. Accordingly, this research seeks to elucidate the parameters of belonging and unbelonging experiences in a variety of different contexts, utilizing a phenomenological framework of analysis, with a view to enhancing our understanding of the interpersonal and other relational factors threatening our well-being and disrupting our place in the social world.

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Chapter 1:

The Basics of Belongingness

1.1 Human Nature and the Drive to Belong

A defining and distinguishing hallmark of the human species is our capacity for sociality. As social beings, we naturally and instinctively seek the company of others. When we bond with others, participate in shared activities, and enjoy similar interests together, it feels like we are part of something – and this is a nice feeling. Abraham Lincoln once said that the better part of one's life consists of their friends. Lincoln has a point: a social life—having a circle of loved ones to be around—is integral to human flourishing. Indeed, if we pick the right friends, join the right clubs, and navigate the right spaces, we have the opportunity to live the life we want. Our capacity for contemplation allows us to make sense of such things as our lived experiences and our place in the world, why we resonate with certain individuals and communities (but not others), what it means to feel a sense of personal fulfilment, what it means to be free, how one can become less lonely, where one can feel more at home, and so on and so forth. In the endeavor to address such questions of an existential nature, we can take guidance from a variety of 20th and 21st century phenomenologists (whose insights will be introduced throughout this work). To gain a deeper understanding of belongingness—what it is like, at an affective and experiential level—in all its guises, extremities, and nuances—let us embark on a phenomenological journey of discovery.

The project at hand is to construct a robust philosophical theory of belongingness, in its various forms (e.g., identity-driven belongingness, national belongingness, belongingness-to-place, virtual belongingness, and so forth). Thus, this research is motivated by the following considerations: (a) that there is

something it is like to belong *and* feel a sense of belonging; (b) that belongingness facilitates an agent's self-actualization (becoming the best possible version of herself); and (c) that the absence of belongingness may negatively impact an agent's personal well-being (mental, physical, and emotional health). This research aims to draw conclusions about the aforementioned lines of inquiry from a primarily phenomenological perspective, while referencing contributions from related fields such as (but not limited to) sociology, social psychology, political science, cognitive science, and psychiatry. Accordingly, the approach for investigation undertaken here proceeds on the basis that belongingness is best understood, first and foremost, as a *relational* concept, comprising an agent's interactions with others, the natural environment, and the world at large – some (or perhaps all) of which may prove subjectively meaningful and thus existentially significant.

A key motivation of this project is to provide the phenomenon of belongingness the philosophical attention and scrutiny it warrants. It is easy to overlook—even diminish—the importance and relevance of belongingness, on account of the phenomenon commonly being considered "a given" (hence rather too obvious). This "givenness"—inherent in one's "thrownness" of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962)—indicates that belongingness is commonly taken for granted. Belongingness often exists or sits in the background, behind one's immediate horizon of awareness. It may be useful to conceive of this taken-for-granted aspect of feeling at home as being "in a state of *flow*", so to speak; in other words, just "being yourself", going about your daily affairs and routines—as per usual/normal, without sparing so much as a thought for such intellectual musings as your purpose or calling in life, or perhaps being burdened by pangs of existential malaise—in a seamless fashion.

To illustrate this point regarding taken-for-grantedness, perhaps we can invoke the analogy of oxygen: much like belongingness, oxygen sustains (and is therefore vital for) your existence, yet you are unlikely to pay much attention to it until and unless you are deprived of it – in which case its absence poses an existential threat. This absence can take several forms, ranging from more trivial or mundane social experiences (e.g., feeling like a stranger at someone's birthday party) to life events of a more serious and personal nature (e.g., ethnic minorities in a neighborhood being harassed and attacked by local thugs in the

aftermath of a far-right government being voted into office). Having or feeling a sense of belonging would not ordinarily evoke a sense of elation or fanfare. However, lacking a sense of belonging—and being aware of this (take for instance the salience of unpleasant and distressing experiences such as racism, ostracization, shame, and so forth)—may well induce feelings of unease or distress; hence why having a sense of belonging restored thereafter is usually accompanied with a sense of relief and gratitude.

Note that the desire to belong may be interpreted in both a "positive" and "negative" sense. In its positive conception, belongingness affords an agent access to life opportunities that she may otherwise be deprived of in the absence of belonging. In this sense, belongingness bears personal significance for an agent, in terms of meaningfulness and practical benefits. Consider how, as a member of an Ivy League university's fraternity, one gains access to many wealthy and powerful individuals and families in America and various associated perks. In its negative conception, belongingness inoculates an agent against some of the vicissitudes of life; for example, how being a member of a support group for recovering alcoholics helps one deal with temptations, providing a buffer against relapse into alcohol addiction. Both the positive and negative conceptions suggest that belongingness is operationally diverse, playing "attack" and "defence" simultaneously. To this end, we can conceptualize the sense of belonging as a kind of "existential insurance scheme" (having others who care about you and have your back to lean on in times of need), which shares a number of affective similarities with the notion of financial security – most notably in terms of the peace of mind (lack of worry) afforded to an agent. When one's financial needs are taken care of, she is liberated from the burdens, stresses, and perhaps even shame and stigma associated with debt. Moreover, financial security affords her access to a wider range of lifestyle choices, obviating the need to regularly to bothered about affordability problems.

In like manner, belongingness acts as a safety net or band-aid against social anxieties, self-consciousness, the hurt and humiliation of rejection, and other such unpleasant aspects of feeling like an outsider or outcast. Of course, there are limits to this buffer zone against the vicissitudes of life – which will become clear as we map out various cases on the landscape of belongingness. As we unpack examples of belongingness (and unbelongingness), several key

ingredients—common threads—that run though experiences of “what it is like to feel at home” come to the fore. I refer to these in Chapter 2 as the “*core pillars* of belongingness”, of which five are identified: *safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom*. An additional pillar of belongingness, *significance*, is introduced at the end of Chapter 2 as a supplementary foundational component for special cases of belongingness (such as those examined in Chapter 4; namely, belongingness with political and spiritual elements in the mix).

Based on the foregoing, we have an appreciation of how the phenomenon of belongingness defies and evades straightforward classification – hence this investigation to peel back the layers. The first stage of investigation here surveys of the applications of belongingness in a variety of observable and describable contexts in which the presence or absence of a sense of belonging evokes certain feelings which are *scrutinizable*, allowing us to get a grip on the fundamental features of the phenomenon.

1.2 Dimensions of Belongingness

The phenomenon of belongingness, place under a lens, is revealed to be complex, multi-faceted, and nuanced. To grasp the contextual scope of belongingness, it is imperative that we map out the phenomenon across various dimensions. In some cases, belongingness is characterized by a sense of nostalgia and connectedness with the past, hence the temporal dimension. Take for instance the various indigenous cultures around the world which associate a sense of belonging with the continuation of historical traditions (e.g., ancestor worship). Maintaining such practices is vital in a rapidly changing world where the indigenous way of life is under threat through modernization and other external social forces. In other cases, belongingness may have more of a future-directed component. For example, new migrants may seek the company of other fellow migrants who have recently settled – in which case the sense of belonging here is rooted in having similar or shared experiences in the process of migration, integration, and building new lives for themselves and

their families. In both sets of cases, belongingness is linked with preserving a sense of (personal/social/cultural) identity, which in turn facilities the attainment of life goals. Understood as such, belongingness may be framed as a dispositional state of affairs, based on an evaluation of a person's standing in society. In other words, your place in the world determines the kinds of opportunities and possibilities for action open to you. Based on your place in the world, you are able to calibrate your sense of self accordingly. Thus, your existential status has a subjectively defined component as well as an externally-imposed component – the latter of which is determined by social institutions and environmental cues. Connections and relations between objects range in form and intensity, revealing how the phenomenon of belongingness in its full scope across various spectrums requires explication. Hence, let us first consider the spectrum of intensity, ranging from "weak" to "strong" variants of belongingness.

At the "weaker" end of the spectrum, we find examples of belongingness that conjure up in-the-moment feelings of connectedness of a temporal nature. The scope of what constitutes these more ordinary and straightforward examples of belongingness encompasses a fairly broad range of activities requiring rudimentary participation, ranging from those of a more prosaic nature (e.g., joining your colleagues for afterwork drinks on Fridays, choir practice at church on Sundays, etc.) to those pertaining to interest or hobby based clubs/groups (e.g., LAN parties with other online gamers, picking magic mushrooms[1] with friends, etc.). Picture yourself feeling a sense of warmth and camaraderie whenever you share a pint (or several) with friends at a local pub, knowing that an evening of hilarity and all-round good cheer awaits, and that you can be your usual jovial self among known others with share your sense of humor. Note, however, that not all activities that generate a sense of belonging require the presence of others. Belongingness can exist in nonsocial contexts too. Imagine the familiar sense of connectedness that greets and beckons you as you enter a forest you frequent, accompanied by feelings of awe as you soak in the immensity of the beauteous landscape – imbuing you with a sense of grandeur. You take a moment to express gratitude to the Universe for opportunities like these to be immersed in transcendent wonderment. Ethereal

[1] And thus, putting the "fun" and "us" back in "fungus".

experiences of this nature are subjectively meaningful, affording you access to moments of elation, pleasure, and inner peace.in emotionally salient ways.

At the “midway” point of the spectrum, we find examples of a sense of belonging that combine aspects of belonging on the basis of “what I like/value” (e.g. hobbies, goals, beliefs) with belonging on the basis of “who I am” (i.e., sociocultural identity), some of which may well overlap. Take for instance the love of football: in theory, this is a recreational activity or hobby; but for many, it is a way of life in which they find a sense of community, local pride, and even greater purpose. As a member of the official supporters’ club of one’s favorite football team, one experiences belongingness in shared activities; for example, congregating together with fellow fans at the local stadium to watch football games, fraternizing with fellow fans at the local pub after a game, and so forth. The atmosphere when fans congregate together to watch their local team play reinforces a sense of belonging, serving as a motivating factor for subsequent attendances at such events. For many football fanatics (e.g., “ultras”), wearing the colors and insignia of their favorite club is much more than a hobby; it could mean *celebrating a shared sense of identity together with others*. This is especially true for football clubs whose activities extend into involvement with local community projects (e.g., players doing charity events). In this respect, even recreational interests and hobbies can have a deeper, more salient relevance to an agent’s self-identified and self-designated sense of belonging.

At the “stronger” end of the spectrum, we find identity-based examples of belongingness where members of various communities share certain common traits and characteristics (e.g., cultural heritage, traditions, cuisines). Two key distinctions follow: ethnocultural traits, implicating immutable and endemic traits such as ethnicity and skin color, and sociocultural traits, implicating shared norms such as religious beliefs and local dialects. Belongingness based on shared traits comprise characteristics that are embodied (on a personal levels) as well as attributes that are embedded (at an interpersonal level, in the social milieux of cultural settings). Communities of belonging along sociocultural and ethnocultural lines (especially the latter), unlike communities with shared recreational interests, can be considered “stronger” forms of belonging in view of the “beyond one’s control” nature of their identities (one cannot simply change one’s skin color the same way one changes one’s dress sense/style for

better social fit) – identities that confer its members a sense that they are part of something bigger or greater (e.g., a sense of honor in community standing).

The salience of a sense of connection to something greater than oneself is well illustrated with respect to indigenous communities around the world and what it means for them to belong – a case in point being the concept in Māori culture of *tūrangawaewae*,[2] which translates as "a place to stand"—referring to one's "foundation", "place in the world", and "home", where one can be/feel "especially empowered and connected". For the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, they derive their sense of personal empowerment or *mana* (esteem/honor/respect/authority) from their standing in the eyes of other members of their community or *iwi* (tribe) to which they belong. In this regard, belongingness is existentially significant in virtue of its relevance to an agent's identity persisting over time. In addition to temporality, belongingness is also experienced by way of spatiality, relationality, and connectivity. Having a place to stand is an existential bedrock, affording Māori a sense that their existence matters to themselves and to others in the community. In this manner, a sense of belonging, for members of indigenous communities, entails having a stake somewhere, such that "the external world is a reflection of an inner sense of security and foundation" (ibid.). The idea that one's inner world extends out into the social—a world of others like and unlike us—is a common characteristic of communities of belonging rooted in collectivistic sociocultural values.

Community involvement is a prominent feature of identity-based belongingness – such as the case is for Māori, for whom having a place to stand not only enriches their lives on a personal level but also equips and empowers them in meeting their existential needs (e.g. access to resources and networks. Thus, lacking social ties may impinge on one's sense of cultural identity and personal self-esteem – and as a consequence frustrate or disrupt the pursuit of life goals and projects. In light of these observations, we see how "groups are not only fundamental to our sense of self, but also to our capacity to do things in the world, in particular, through processes of collective action and social change" (Haslam et al 2019: 36-37). Identity-based variants of belonging exemplifying "stronger" versions of the phenomenon, providing context for

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[2] URL = <https://teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/page-5>.

understanding how threats to social connection affect members of various communities in different ways, and why respective responses make sense.

The case of the Māori communities of New Zealand showcases a unique form of belongingness—where the concept 'me' arises primarily or predominantly on account of a sense of the 'we'—that has an empowering effect on an agent. Indeed, belonging by way of having a place to stand affords an agent access to shared experiences of we-ness that make her feel included, hence reinforcing a sense of who she is. Conversely, being excluded can be destabilizing for an agent's mental health (a theme further explored in Chapters 4 and 5). Indeed, "the experience of being *left out* […] leads to an *unstable* sense of self" where one runs the risk of being excluded from or deprived of relationships, "experienced as cold, distant, lonely, and unfair and the individual left out feels r*educed* and *invisible* to others" (Clegg 2006: 60; emphasis added), thereby feeling insignificant and dispensable. "Stronger" cases of belongingness reveal how togetherness of the identity-driven variants are intertwined with considerations of well-being, relevant in assessing mental health outcomes and other determinants of personal flourishing in the face of existential threats that rattle some or all of the pillars of belongingness.

The ability to act in ways that reinforce one's cultural identity indeed appears to be a common theme found in "stronger" versions of belongingness. This certainly holds true with respect to the people of Finland too, for whom belongingness is defined by the embracement of independence and self-reliance, norms which are realized and expressed in moments of solitude in/with nature. In this respect, we find that belongingness exists in both social and solitary contexts. For Finns, their sense of belonging and personal empowerment (similar to that of the Māori people of New Zealand) is strongly associated with being connected to the natural environment – the key difference being the emphasis Finns place on self-reliance and self-sufficiency (rather than community ties) as the hallmarks of personal identity and well-being. With Finland being sparsely populated and heavily forested, "Finns can be described as forest-dwellers [who] tend to be less outgoing than occupants of open land and value their privacy more" and who have adapted introspective and introverted behavioral tendencies (Lewis 2004: 20). Thus, dependability—especially on oneself—is a defining trait of the Finnish mindset and identity: a

trait which gives the Finnish variant of belonging a unique and distinct flavor, in relation to other forms of belonging defined more by collectivistic norms/values.

The Finnish cultural norm of *sisu*—which roughly translates as "grit" and "guts" —extols the virtues of independence: tenacity, resilience, and determination against the odds and elements. According to Karjalainen, "*sisu* comprises three core components of resilience, belonging, and purpose", noting that *sisu* is "a set of values and outlooks that the people of Finland share and identify with on many levels" (Karjalainen 2018). Lahti (2019) echoes the theme of resilience, framing *sisu* as "embodied fortitude": tolerance of—and endurance to overcome—adversity, requiring both physical and mental exertion (Lahti 2019: 72). With the particularities of its geography combined with its climate—expansive and often inhospitable landscapes, coupled with harsh winters—Finland provides ample opportunities for an agent to have her willpower tested.

Given this environmental backdrop, grit—an inherent part of the Finnish way of life and unique to this particular brand of culture-bound belongingness—manifests in "the expression of *sisu* […] often called into being through the dynamic ebb and flow of situations that require [Finns] to act and respond" (Lahti 2019: 74). Lahti adds that Finns consider adversity to be character-building: "a pathway to strength" that often acts as "a powerful catalyst for positive, life-altering changes in an individual's life" (Lahti 2019: 75). Both Karjalainen and Lahti point out that while *sisu* is often characterized by solitude, it is nonetheless by no means an antisocial concept. Rather, Finns have—relative to members of other cultures—less of an aversion to being alone, given their recognition of the benefits of the lone wolf disposition in fine-tuning one's survival instincts in an austere environment (Lewis 2004: 21). Thus, despite the "uncompromising existence" of life in Finland, Finns nonetheless have a keen sense of affinity for their country – and have no desire to call any other place home (Lewis 2004: 22). Belongingness in this sense means oneness with one's homeland – and Finns are immensely proud of their culture and heritage.

Practices and expressions of belonging by both Māori and Finns indicate that belongingness matters for the reinforcement of one's cultural heritage, values, and norms – for the continuity of one's way of life against the backdrop of certain environmental and sociocultural conditions. Interestingly, even though the Māori disposition in encountering the world represents a culture

more distinctly defined by collectivistic values, whereas the Finnish disposition in encountering the world represents a culture more distinctly defined by individualistic values, the common characteristic shared by both cultures is the sense of homelikeness (and feelings of significance thereof) experienced through communion with nature and the natural environment. Both ethnocultural communities, severally, draw their sense of cultural and national identity from a strong sense of pride in who they are based on where they are from and the natural environment to which they feel emotionally and spiritually tethered – an environment that facilitates the expressivity and exercise of one's agency in personally meaningful ways. Furthermore, both communities demonstrate how having access to others similarly culturally aligned can be "a key source of personal meaning, purpose, and worth" (Haslam et al 2019: 32). Both Finns and Māori share an affinity for their respective countries and a sense of pride in their cultural identity and heritage. Members of both sets of cultures and traditions recognize that their belongingness is intrinsically linked with the means and ability to self-actualize in an environment they identify strongly with and call home. Accordingly, it could be argued that a life of flourishing is one that allows an agent the ability to make choices that reflect personal preferences regarding the kinds of goal-fulfilling prospective life experiences she would like to have (Paul 2014: 112). Being a master of one's own destiny is intrinsically linked with self-esteem and feelings of well-being. A way of life that is well-integrated in a social environment—in which one feels at home, both with oneself and in one's surroundings—allows an agent to exercise her autonomy and feel a sense of control and ownership of her future and what lies ahead.

Indeed, belongingness confers possibilities for furtherance and attainment of one's life goals relating to matters of self-actualization; in turn, having positive effects on one's health and well-being. As Haslam et al (2919) observe, "social identities and social identifications allow us to fulfil our potential as humans and, hence, generally have positive implications for health" (Haslam et al 2019: 32), on the basis that these identities are personally meaningful and give us access to important social and psychological resources" (Haslam et al 2019: 33). Indeed, the drive for self-fulfilment characterizes both generally pro-social (e.g., Māori) and generally pro-solitude (e.g., Finnish) forms of identity-based belongingness. To this end, an environment which affords an agent

various opportunities for self-fulfilment certainly feels like the right kind of existential backdrop in which one enjoys various possibilities to build for oneself a eudaimonic, identity-affirming life of belonging *somewhere*.

That which you identify—and affiliate yourself—with is a reflection and extension of you. In a world in which an agent's sense of belonging has been established, her participation in a social world feels natural and effortless. In this manner, we can say that the agent's belonging is predicated on her attunement and enculturation to "a like-minded world of traditions, narratives, expectations, and character ideals" (Altman 2016: 453) – one which allows her to realize her goals, fulfil her needs, and attain self-actualization. Accordingly, it ought to be clear by now, at this stage of our enquiry, that establishing or asserting a sense of belonging is a prerequisite for autonomy and self-determination – certainly with regard to stronger variants of belonging (a point further explored in the analysis of the Pillar of Significance in Chapter 2).

Now that we have surveyed varieties of belongingness ranging from the mundane to the personally meaningful, through this process gaining a greater appreciation of the breadth and depth of the phenomenon, the next stage in our journey through the basics of belongingness gives us cause to raise the question: how does one *know* if one belongs?

1.3 Awareness of Belongingness

Thus far, we have examined the phenomenon of belongingness in terms of its dimensionality. A sense of belonging can be identified in a rich variety of cases, ranging from more mundane forms to those of greater personal significance. This task of delineation is made possible on account of belongingness being *observable*, from a third-person perspective, not just experientially accessible from a first-person perspective. Indeed, belongingness can be ascertained by way of social cues, geographical markers, social interactions, body language, symbolic representations, and so forth. Observation affords you insights into what others may be experiencing in

relation to your own experiences: the warmth with which you are received (or not) by the host, the presence (or absence) of chemistry with other attendees at a party, and so forth. Social interactions—ease or awkwardness thereof—offer you some clues regarding whether this social scene is the right one for you; that is, whether your “characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment” (Hagerty et al 1992: 173) such that you are a good/natural fit. In other words, via certain social and environmental cues, an agent experiences her social/natural environment as either welcoming/inviting or cold/alienating, providing her with the knowhow for subsequent action (e.g., whether she ought to stick around, or inconspicuously shuffle her way toward the exit). A further test for belongingness relates to experiences of “feeling valued, needed, accepted” – otherwise known as “valued involvement” (Hagerty et al 1992: 173). Right fit along with valued involvement inform an agent of her degree of belongingness, which can be interrogated subjectively. The notion of right fit also applies to non-social cases; for example, types of belongingness that characterize an agent’s connection with place or nature – as well as types of belongingness of a more metaphysical, ethereal, or transcendental nature.

The perspective that belongingness can be (and often is) sensed/emoted is further illustrated via the analogy of love; that is, the status of being in love (much like the status of belonging) is such that one can have an established bond (romantic or social) without constantly having to affirm or validate it. After all, a third-party observer can ascertain, through observation alone, whether someone is in love by their actions. However, in the absence of actions, that doesn't mean a person isn't in love either. Consider this: if you buy flowers for your partner, this is an act of love: an act demonstrating you are in love. But if you don't buy flowers for your partner, surely the absence of this gesture is no indication of a lack of love (or not being in love)? Constant or consistent action to prove one’s love is unnecessary; there appears to be no good reason for setting the bar quite so high. To this end, another parallel between the way we conceive of belongingness and love can be found in the attribution of the status (of belongingness or of being in love) for a temporally extended period, despite occurrent feelings (of belongingness/love) not always being present or within one’s realm of immediate conscious awareness. Belongingness, much like being in love, can be perceived and measured through *patterns* of feelings and

behaviors. These patterns paint an overall picture and tell us a story of the nature of an agent's belongingness (or otherwise). Thus, it is unnecessary for an agent to constantly and consistently affirm her belongingness (to herself or to others) – so long as there are other methods of making this inference.

Indeed, belongingness (its presence or absence) is observable through behavior and speech. With respect to we-experiences, an agent becomes aware of belongingness in relation to the use of language in discussing shared activities: for example, remarks such as "shall we (go)…?" and "let's (do)…" indicate the presence of a first-person plural collectively intending and expressing (Schmid 2014a: 11) – where intentionality (intending to do something) is to be "understood in terms of our essentially shareable and affectively enabled belongingness to the world" (Sánchez Guerrero 2016: 27). Intending to act together certainly helps reinforce a sense of belonging, with participating agents being consciously aware that by caring about the shared activity at hand, they are essentially engaging in a *caring-with* mode of action (Sánchez Guerrero 2016: 196). In this manner, where there is pluralistic attentional directedness in the participation of a we-activity, mutual awareness of the togetherness of the shared experience generates a transformational perspective on and understanding of the shared experience being experienced as an *us* (Pacherie 2018: 169). Feelings associated with the experience of sharedness and togetherness thus offer an agent increased awareness of the plural dimensions of belongingness – notably, by way of the kinds of moods generated by we-experiences. A mood, which Ratcliffe describes as "a background sense of belonging to a meaningful world, a condition of possibility for having intentional states" (Ratcliffe 2009a: 356), transposes from person to person and diffuse into the atmospheres of environments, thus enabling agents having we-experiences to imbibe in shared affective salience of we-activities.

Moreover, a mood forms the basis of an existential background, allowing bodily feelings to reveal "spaces of significant possibility" (Ratcliffe 2009a: 369). Mood generates a particular atmosphere—a "common ground between people" as well as "a space of attunement" (Trigg 2020: 2)—which has the effect of contributing to "a sense of togetherness in both the pre-reflective/passive and reflective/active sense of the term attunement" (Trigg 2020: 6). Think, for example, of the kinds of atmospheres created and enjoyed at social events with

large throngs of people in attendance, such as music festivals and sporting events. Moods and atmospheres are predominantly the products of collectives which, when properly examined, may well reveal insights on the kinds of belongingness (or unbelongingness, as the case may be) afforded by the social interactions of willing (and unwilling) participants. Invoking the notions of mood and atmosphere thus equips us with an expanded phenomenological toolkit for the purposes of investigating the full gamut of belongingness – including an appreciation of the significance of belongingness to certain agents, such as those for whom belongingness is synonymous with identity (Antonsich 2010: 644). In the endeavor to explicate how one knows if/that one belongs—i.e., how one has perceptual access to such knowledge—it ought to be apparent that we require the phenomenological input of various tools at our disposal.

1.4 Why Belongingness Matters

Belongingness truly is a rich and complex and phenomenon, as revealed in examples of belongingness in its various guises spanning several dimensions and spectrums discussed in this chapter. The "pervasive drive" for forging "lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary 1995: 497) motivates as to act in certain ways, in the attempt to access the important things to us in life: what I will be referring to henceforth as "existential goods",[3] drawing on Roberts' and Krueger's (2021) concept of

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[3] Note that existential goods implicate the same targets as social goods (e.g., companionship, moral support, intimacy, warmth, etc.). However, referring to these targets as "existential" rather than (merely) "social" frees up possibilities and opportunities for *additional and alternative ways* of accessing said targets *sans* sociality and social routes. In certain cases, consider how what you seek (i.e., the goods targeted) may well be accessible via nonsocial means. Take for instance goods such as resilience, fortitude, and emotional stability—more commonly associated with benefits derived from (and conferred through) social bonds and interactions—which may also be accessed through individual means (e.g., developing inner strength through mindfulness practices and various yoga and meditation techniques), in which case reliance on the social world is somewhat superfluous for attainment of the goods one needs/seeks (certainly in these specific circumstances anyway). Thus, referring to these goods as "existential" rather than (primarily or predominantly) "social" provides a greater degree of philosophical flexibility and nuance – particularly when investigating specific variants of belongingness characterized by more pronounced pro-solitude attitudes and dispositions, as well as in making sense (the "how/why") of the adaptive motivations, responses, and outcomes of solitary agents in attaining homelikeness.

"social goods". In one respect, having a sense of belonging means having meaningful interactions and connections "marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" (Baumeister & Leary 1995: 500) such that the existential goods one needs are available, accessible, and attainable. To this end, belongingness demands *action* (e.g.., participation).

Being part of an in-group—thus having opportunities to bond with like-minded others and to be included in shared activities—is immensely beneficial for one's agency, self-esteem, and overall sense of well-being. An agent seeking the existential comforts that belongingness affords will likely do what it takes to make it happen – to the best of her abilities, against the forces of nature and society. Belonging in the right in-group feels right on account of the group's norms and values reflecting your own (and vice versa). Mirroring of norms and values (between the individual and the collective) suggests right social fit. Characteristics attributable to social contexts and networks may act as magnets, drawing in the right crowds. Picture how a city known for its love of surfing and sunny beaches like Brisbane is likely to attract extroverted, sporty individuals; whereas an introvert with, say, a predilection for heavy metal music is more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging in a city such as Helsinki or Montreal, both of which are known for thriving local metalhead communities; and so on and so forth. Rietveld et al (2019) provide us with an example of a person with socially liberal values who feels at home—and as such, is a good (or perhaps even "right") fit—in a socially liberal city like Amsterdam (Rietveld et al 2019: 306). In a city of right kind of personality fit, an agent is better able and *poised* to relate to others who similarly regard the city as home, for similar reasons, on a deeper level – paving the way for belonging feelings to arise.

The likelihood of an agent developing affability and affinity toward those with whom she shares similar norms—even if they are strangers to begin with—is ever greater where personality fit to group may be discovered – hence the agent with liberal values being drawn to a socially liberal city like Amsterdam and feeling right at home there. Accordingly, "people who live around others with personalities more similar to their own should experience less uncertainty and more social validation, which should enhance their feelings of belonging and self-esteem" (Bleidorn et al 2016: 420). These findings suggest that person-city personality fit is a determining factor mitigating the extent of an

agent's participation in shared activities, considerations which impact an agent's "sense of efficacy" and autonomy (Haslam et al 2019: 36) – which in turn affords her various opportunities for the pursuit of a flourishing life. Personality-fit-with-city may well be a factor in, say, motivating the migratory drives of certain agents seeking to (re)build a (more) homelike existence someplace where possibilities are available for living one's life in accordance with one's values.

To identify with others, based on congruence of values, certainly contributes to feeling a sense of belonging and reinforces one's sense of identity and self-worth. Furthermore, the benefits of reciprocity arising from socially cohesive interactions allow participants to feel valued as members of the group (Hindley 2019: 76). Having meaningful shared experiences with similarly aligned others is a key indicator and determinant of belongingness. Thus, for an agent figuring out where her right fit is, embodied reflection may further reveal better ways to connect with others with whom she can express herself freely, thereby finding a sense of belonging with others with shared identity, norms, and perspectives (Moradi et al 2019: 299). Members of groups who frequently participate in shared activities are likely to find a mutual sense of belonging on account of personality fit over time. Similarly, a right-fit social environment such as a city (rather like a group setting) may provide an agent with opportunities for self-expression. Being the right personality fit in an appropriate and similarly aligned sociocultural or ethnocultural environment can be empowering and therefore beneficial for an agent's health – with the reverse also being true – since "being around others who share one's personality characteristics has self-validating effects" (Bleidorn et al 2016: 420). In finding common ground with others on account of right fit, an agent is made aware where/that she belongs, and why it matters to her in certain meaningful ways.

1.5 Summary

The world of sociality requires skilful navigation to get the best out of it: accessing the right opportunities to establish a homelike environment in which to stake your place and live out the story of your life. For some agents, to belong matters greatly because it allows them to live self-fulfilling lives. For

others, to belong simply means to have basic creature comforts and not having to worry about unnecessary threats to one's life (e.g., warlike conditions). Whatever one's subjective motivations may be, one thing is clear: belongingness is imperative for one to survive (perhaps even thrive), and for the affirmation of one's self-esteem. Experiences of caring and emoting together with others play mediating and formative roles in regulating one's sense of self-worth, on account of the fact that members of collectives make choices to participate based on *emotional attunement* with fellow group members (Clegg 2006: 60). An agent is motivated to maintain her attunement to a social environment of perceived belonging in view of her desire to avert any associated unpleasantness of being an outsider. With these considerations in mind, perhaps we can think of belongingness as an anchor whenever the world thrusts us into an ocean of existential uncertainty, throwing us off balance.

In preceding discussions, we see how the phenomenon of belongingness is complex, multidimensional, nuanced, sometimes profound, and altogether fascinating. Moreover, the further we examine belongingness, it becomes increasingly apparent that our understanding of this phenomenon could benefit from further scholarship. With foregoing considerations in mind, the objective of this project is to generate new (and renewed) academic (and public) interest in the phenomenon of belongingness, with a view to providing fresh and valuable contributions to the philosophy and phenomenology of belongingness.

Chapter 2:

The Roots of Belongingness

Belongingness is a fascinating yet perplexing phenomenon. We seem to have a grasp of what it is like to belong in everyday life in the ordinary sense, based on the terms of reference we use; for example, with respect to fostering a sense of belonging at one's workplace, feeling a sense of belonging at an annual music festival like Burning Man, and so forth. Belongingness may connote membership of—and loyalty to—a community or group of individuals (e.g., being a supporter of your local football team, a member of Students for Justice in Palestine, etc). What it means to belong can vary from one context or environment to another. Nevertheless, a common thread runs through these various scenarios. We can boil this down to key ingredients that form the *crux* of belongingness. To this end, I propose that the key ingredients—*core pillars*— of belongingness, in no particular order of value or importance, are as follows:

- Safety
- Trust
- Acceptance
- Familiarity
- Freedom

An additional pillar—significance, which captures abstract, ethereal, transcendental, metaphysical, and spiritual aspects of homelikeness beyond the scope of the core "STAFF" pillars—will also be discussed at the end of this chapter. The aim of this proposed taxonomy is to frame belongingness as a fundamentally *experiential* phenomenon.

Rather serendipitously, the acronym "STAFF" conjures up an image of a wooden staff one sticks into the ground, as if to lay claim to a space/place ("*this* is home"; "I belong *here*", etc.). The acronym "STAFF" can also refer to the right

kind of personnel at a workplace, where the company culture aims to create a sense of belonging among staff. Belongingness is the bond that binds agents together with others, and to wherever it is they call home or their stomping ground, bringing a whole host of benefits. Belongingness provides a buffer or safeguard against the vicissitudes of life. Belongingness provides grounding in turbulent times. Belongingness provides a springboard from which one can launch oneself into new horizons. Belongingness has practical everyday benefits. Belongingness also provides a lifeline for the vulnerable and miserable. Having to fend for yourself, all by yourself, can be tough. For these reasons (and more), belongingness matters for the average person. The desire to feel at home somewhere is universal, relatable, and subject to all kinds of existential threats. Belongingness is something you enact: it takes effort, skill, opportunity, and perhaps a dose of luck too. The journey to belong is fraught with pitfalls, challenges, disappointments. However, it is also essential, exhilarating, enlightening, and ultimately rewarding. Hence, to discover what lies at the heart of belongingness, we must identify and unpack its core pillars.

Throughout this work, I will be referencing the five core pillars of belongingness—safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom—as I investigate various cases studies and examples. These pillars, in my view, form the essential conditions of the phenomenon of belongingness, thus providing a philosophical basis for assessing what it is like to experience a sense of belonging across a variety of different contexts and domains.

2.1 The Pillar of Safety

Let us begin our foray into the foundational aspects of the phenomenon of belongingness by examining the first pillar: safety. The initial claim to make here is that it is unlikely an agent can truly be said to feel or have a sense of belonging in a context where she feels unsafe. For this reason, we can surmise that safety is a central and easily recognizable component of belongingness, and an appropriate starting point as we unpack the complex experiences that

characterize the phenomenon. At a rudimentary level, the feeling of safety is perhaps best characterized in terms of "safety *from*…". Safety covers a wide range of situations, including those where physical and/or psychic harms—both of which are often interrelated and intertwined—may arise. On the more "severe" end of the safety spectrum, one could think of dangers and threats to one's personal security and well-being: bullying, harassment, reprisal, ridicule, ostracism, stigmatization, and so forth. It is only human, after all, to fear the unknown and be anxious about bad things happening to us. When faced with threats, real or imagined, an agent may seek a haven from harm in the company of others (or perhaps within her own designated safe space); that is, through a sense of belonging somewhere homelike, comforting, and reassuring.

Our analysis of the notion of safety is assisted by surveying the overall terrain of threats (to a person). A safety threat is a situation that poses harm to one's well-being and peace of mind. On the lower end of the safety spectrum, let us consider basic public safety measures – for example, at events with high levels of attendance. At heavy metal music festivals, safety is paramount: for concertgoers, concert organizers, and performers alike. Whenever someone in a mosh pit falls over (as is often the case, especially in so-called "circle pits", where metalheads form a large circle and run/jump/dance around in a circular motion either clockwise or anticlockwise), others will immediately reach out to help this person up. The American band Slipknot, renowned for their aggressive musical style and image, has on several occasions stopped their performances when made aware of fans in the crowd experiencing some form of difficulty (such as a medical incident/emergency).[4] On the more extreme end of the scale, being on the receiving end of death threats and other threats of physical violence constitutes an obvious and immediate safety risk. Examples of severe safety risks include Jewish students who faced intimidation, harassment, abuse, and bullying on US university campuses in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on the citizens of Israel on 7 October 2023, violent far-right protests outside lodgings housing asylum-seekers in the UK, and so forth. Staring down a mob calling for blood is a scary situation to find oneself in. Mike

[4] Two such incidents, occurring at concerts in Canada and the United States respectively, are reported here <https://www.revolvermag.com/music/see-slipknot-stop-show-help-fan-they-cant-breathe> and here <https://loudwire.com/slipknot-stop-performance-direct-emts-struggling-fan-crowd>.

Freer, the UK's now-former Justice Minister, resigned in early 2024 after facing such threats to his life from protestors, culminating in an arson attack on his constituency office in December 2023.[5] Threats of physical violence are quite possibly some of the most frightening life experiences one can have, especially when all alone. Facing the world alone can be daunting, even in the absence of threats to oneself. There is safety in numbers, as the saying goes. Facing off with counter-protestors is less intimidating when fellow protestors are *standing with you*. Belonging to a group or community thus gives you strength, reassurance, and confidence. Belongingness means having something to hold onto – something steady and steadfast.

Similarly, receiving positive "vibes" from loved ones and well-wishers—a support network—can help one get through a tough time. It is certainly nice to feel safe, and nobody is immune from this feeling. (Note, for instance, how billionaires have reportedly been building nuclear bunkers in New Zealand and Hawaii in recent years, on account of a perceived probability of a looming and imminent doomsday event.[6] Heck, even the super-rich fear for their safety.) More often than not, personal safety is a paramount consideration as we go about our daily activities. We may, for instance, find ourselves quickening our pace when venturing through a "rough part of town", especially when travelling alone. The desire to feel safe and not be harmed is universal, what Maslow (1970/1943) refers to as a basic human need alongside the likes of food, water, shelter, and warmth. Life would be untenable if one is in constant fear of being harmed. Having a sense of belonging is therefore often a robust defence against "bad things happening" to oneself.

Safety, a basic human need as per Maslow's hierarchy of needs, is perhaps the most straightforward pillar of belongingness to grasp. We all want to feel safe; we know what it is like to feel safe; and we have an idea of what safety looks like. Safety is usually a background experience of feeling unencumbered such that we can go about our daily routines without, say, having to constantly look over our shoulders for physical threats or verbal abuse. There is an expectation that the world will not interfere with me, thus

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[5] URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/01/dark-day-politics-mp-mike-freer-constituents-shock-decision-to-quit>

[6] URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/sep/04/super-rich-prepper-bunkers-apocalypse-survival-richest-rushkoff>

obviating the need to worry about or second-guess my environment and the possibilities it presents for action and reaction. All this sounds incontrovertible. However, what it takes to feel safe is very much unique from person to person. The reason for this is simple: everyone has different needs, and everyone prioritizes these needs differently. Thus, while it may be tempting to think that the feeling of safety—and the absence, loss, or lack thereof—is relatively straightforward to comprehend and conceptualize, in practice, the prescription of safety is s rather trickier affair. This is especially so particularly when there is a clash or conflict of needs. Implementing the right course(s) of action to achieve a sense of safety therefore requires a degree of rumination.

Returning to the events of 7 October 2023 (when Hamas launched attacks on the citizens of Israel, and armed conflict broke out between Israel and Palestine), an increase in anti-Semitic sentiment (verbal abuse, physical attacks, etc.) has since been reported, to the extent that some Jewish individuals living in the UK have been forced to conceal their Jewish identity.[7] (Similar incidents of anti-Semitism have been reported in other countries as well, such as the United States.[8]) On the other hand, Muslim communities around the world have also reported facing verbal, physical, and online threats as retaliation and reprisal for Hamas having started the war.[9] Here are two communities with minority status in the Western world who are in conflict with each other, facing animosity from the wider population. Both communities feel unsafe, albeit for different reasons. Nevertheless, they share a common trait: the sense of belongingness has never *mattered* more than in times like these when one feels marginalized, victimized, and stigmatized. The feeling of unsafety is raw and real. Be it the frowning glare of passersby or immoderate messages posted on social media, members of the Jewish and Muslim communities bear the brunt of society's wrath. Personal and group safety issues—where members of certain communities are routinely susceptible to

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[7] URL = <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13110571/Some-staff-suspended-Jewish-father-applying-UK-passport-five-month-old-daughter-birth-certificate-returned-defaced-birthplace-Israel-scribbled-out.html>

[8] URL – <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/29/business/antisemitism-college-harvard-upenn/index.html - "'I have become traumatized.' Jewish students describe campus antisemitism">

[9] URL = <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-68374372 - "Anti-Muslim cases surge in UK since Hamas attacks, charity finds">

harassment, hostility, and violence—are symptomatic of a polarized and divided society in which belongingness has never been so precarious and necessary.

While threats often take the form of physical harm, threats to one's overall well-being go beyond acts of physical violence: they also include reputational harm, exclusion, ridicule, and so forth. Consider the lived experiences of a member of one of society's subcultures; for example, a metalhead simply trying to fit in. In view of a metalhead having experienced ridicule, ostracism, or exclusion, perhaps even verbal and/or physical attacks, we can imagine scenarios where she may feel unsafe. We have all heard of the trope of the goth kid at school who is an outcast and outlier, on account of her choice of music and dress, and who may from time to time experience ridicule, harassment, or bullying. The case of Sophie Lancaster (see section 2.3 below for a discussion of this case in relation to the pillar of acceptance), a self-identified goth who was beaten to death by thugs simply for the way she looked, is a clear-cut example of this. No doubt other goth/alternative youth would have experienced similar acts of hostility, even if not the same level of violence. In fact, many youths in general report similar experiences of being left out of social groups at school, not being accepted into cliques of "cool" kids, and so forth.

These examples highlight the fact that belongingness is not always a given; certainly not in the mainstream social sphere for a kid who dresses differently and subscribes to a fringe subculture. To find a sense of belonging, it is incumbent on her to seek out other goth kids at school, for instance, which is no easy feat when other like-minded individuals are few and far between. Imagine a socially anxious or awkward kid seeking the company of peers from the same social scene or subculture: she will likely feel safer and more self-confident than being by herself (for example, when hanging out at the mall). In the company of others, who acknowledge your presence and value your company, it feels like you do matter. Thus, if some bully comes along and gives you a hard time, you can reasonably expect that your fellow goth friends will come to your aid/rescue. Belongingness, even at a low level (like having a bunch of friends to hang out with regularly) can help assuage the safety concerns of a particularly vulnerable agent. Safety, depicted thusly, consists of two fundamental elements: experiencing an *absence* of threats to one's welfare,

and experiencing the *presence* of (known/trusted) others who are poised to defend oneself against unprovoked threats from society's hostile elements.

Concerns about safety become front and centre in our everyday lives in the face of new threats, best exemplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020. Daily routines were disrupted, often without warning. As the imminent threat and actual cases of infection loomed large, nobody was immune. Threats of viral infection (and fears thereof) became a new hazard we all had to contend with. For some of us, our lives were turned upside down. Imagine what it was like for an avid gym-goer who contracted COVID-19 from a fellow gym-goer, forcing her to curb her fitness regime while convalescing in the safety of her own home. Perhaps she found herself disinclined to return to the gym anytime soon, on account of feeling vulnerable to reinfection. And perhaps she may have had a friend who suffered an adverse reaction from having caught the virus; this would have acted as a further disincentive and deterrent with respect to venturing out into public spaces, and likely prompted her to be more discerning in when, where, how, and with whom she socializes. As such, an agent who feels particularly vulnerable to infection likely has a preference for ensconcing herself in whatever environment affords her a buffer against the seemingly scary world out there. One's abode—a home and haven to return to each day, after encountering the world in whatever manner—is a safety net we all crave: As Bormanis observes, "we need moments of solitude and retreat, we require a private space to call our own; we need a space where, even if the walls are porous, even if we can hear the neighbors fighting or the traffic on the street, we feel as if we can relax and forget the concerns of the outside world." (Bormanis 2019: 23). Indeed, one's home is a refuge: a place to take cover (from the world), a place to recover (from harms), and a place to discover (e.g., new things about oneself, new insights on how one feels about others/life, etc.).

With this in mind, we can observe how "[i]llness remind us not only of the frailty and vulnerability of our physical bodies but of the structural vulnerability of our own self-understanding and ability-to-be" (Aho 2019: 59). Being sick—even the fear of getting sick—instils in us tension, stress, and worry, exposing the frailty of the human body and the fragility of human life. This fear of contracting diseases provokes a reaction; namely, to isolate oneself and withdraw from human contact. Note how this fear (of contracting an illness) is not too

dissimilar to the fear of being physically assaulted: the integrity of one's body remains at stake. The threat of infection, illness, or injury can be as distressing as threats of physical violence. After all, the fear of being harmed encompasses all the possible ways one's bodily integrity and peace of mind are compromised. When a gym-goer returns to the gym, she may find that activities which were once familiar and which she once took for granted—using the communal equipment, socializing with other gym-goers, coming and going as she pleases, and so forth—henceforth appear and feel different: the mood is sombre, gym-goers are keeping their distance from one another, friendly chats are fewer and farther between, signs reminding users of equipment to apply hand sanitizer before each use, and so on. The threat of re-infection is always a distinct possibility.[10] There may well be safety in numbers – but equally so, there is safety in keeping one's distance. Spaces that allow more breathing room may therefore feel more homelike and comforting, even when participant numbers are depleted. Thus, to feel safe in turbulent times, one may withdraw from the outside world and become a different person (for instance, less sociable), with safety concerns having a potentially life-altering effect (and not for the better).

Now let us consider the experiences of safety as safeguards against different kinds of threats. The phenomenology of safety with respect to being safe from infection and other medical harms differs from being safe from physical harms, in the sense that one is less sure or certain of how to act or respond – given that threats of infection are less visible and apparent and therefore trickier to identify and navigate. This line of inquiry brings up other phenomenological elements of feeling safe: heightened vigilance of one's environment, increased awareness of one's emotional reactions (e.g., pangs of anxiety and distress arising), and readiness to respond accordingly (e.g., to engage in fight or flight). Threats to safety of the non-physical kind (e.g., emotional harms, psychological harms, medical harms, etc.), despite lacking physical contact (and violence), nevertheless affect an agent viscerally (i.e., at a bodily level). Even though the threats may not be immediately visible, obvious,

[10] Given the stigma attached to illness, an agent who has previously contracted COVID-19 may find herself being ostracized by her peers when she attempts to reintegrate herself into the world post-recovery. In this context, feeling safe takes on a different meaning: being accepted by those who do not perceive you as a threat. Thus, the pillar of safety often goes hand-in-hand with other pillars, such as acceptance and trust, similarly implicating aspects of social relationality.

or tangible, they nonetheless exist somewhere in the background and disturb an agent's peace of mind in some salient manner.

Consider the experience of a woman who has been stalked. No physical confrontation or altercation may have occurred; nevertheless, the presence of the stalker (somewhere in the background or vicinity) and prospect of him making an unwarranted and unforeseen appearance or move at any given moment looms large. Thus, she is likely to feel a palpable sense of unsafety (even danger). Similarly, a family who has just relocated to a so-called "rough" neighborhood, remaining to be fully integrated in their new environment, and who have heard horror stories of regular muggings, stabbings, and burglaries from neighbors and on the news, is likely to live in fear of the potentiality of being the next victims, with danger seemingly lurking everywhere. In these examples, the desire to stave off anxiety, worry, and stress motivates the pursuit of safety, security, and survival through whatever means necessary. Living in constant fear of one's safety is no way to live a happy and meaningful life. Moreover, safety-inducing anxiety can make you feel *less like yourself*:

> "Anxiety about psychic survival is closely linked to the changing perception of the self and its relation to the world. In this context, the meaning of personal identity has lost some of its sense of continuity and become more fluid. Significantly, the relationship between identity and a durable public world is experienced as increasingly fragile." (Furedi 2018: 216)

Here, Furedi highlights how anxiety about one's survival transforms one's relationship with one's environment, impinging on one's ability to be oneself. Being plagued with anxiety encroaches on one's secure and stable place in the world. Thus, an antidote to feeling unsafe often manifests as a transformation in the way one is orientated toward the world at large; notably, in the social group(s) one chooses to align oneself with.

The woman being stalked in the example above may respond by taking up self-defence classes and bonding with other women who have similarly felt unsafe from unwanted advances when walking home. The family fearing for their safety in a neighborhood notorious for high incidences of crime may respond by joining the local neighborhood watch group or becoming more friendly and sociable with their neighbors, to help keep an eye on their property during periods of absences. And so on and so forth. In these cases, the drive

to feel (and be) safe from threats to one's life, livelihood, and well-being is likely in full activation mode. The takeaway from this line of enquiry is threefold: firstly, threats to personal safety (imminent or otherwise) undermine one's sense of belonging; secondly, that physical and/or psychical threats that are apparent to some may not be relevant to others and therefore need to be carefully delineated; and thirdly, threats applicable to certain targeted groups at a group level can trickle down to members of these groups at an individual level.

At this point in our investigation of safety as a pillar of belongingness, it is worth noting that, while feeling safe is associated with positive emotions, the desire and drive to feel safe can sometimes be borne out of—or lead to—social conflict. This clash of perspectives plays out most prominently in the claiming of safe spaces. Take for instance the case of Prof. Kathleen Stock, formerly a professor of philosophy at the University of Sussex. who was hounded out of her job,[11] and in the way comedians in the US and UK are being "cancelled"[12]—being silenced (e.g., "de-platformed" from social media sites) and punished (e.g., through loss of employment)—in both cases, for expressing views that are considered "gender-critical". In the case of Prof. Stock, those who motioned for her cancellation did so on grounds that her opinions jeopardized their sense of identity and thus resulted in feelings of unsafety. On the other hand, those who supported Prof. Stock argued that she—and others, who hold views contrarian to those of the trans cause and their allies—ought to have the right to express herself free from fear of reprisal and adverse consequences. Likewise, in the case of American comedian Dave Chappelle, who has faced similar backlash for his brand of humor that pokes fun at the trans movement (at one of his stand-up performances, he was even attacked by a trans activist[13]), those who oppose him make a case for his jokes causing mental distress, whereas those who support him argue that the comedy stage ought to be a safe space for the telling of jokes without fear of censorship or damage to one's career and reputation (or indeed to one's physical self). The battle lines have been drawn, and there is no clear-cut solution to this – so long as safety means different

[11] URL = <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/28/kathleen-stock-interview-oxford-university-gender-debate/>

[12] URL = <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-62249771 - "Dave Chappelle show cancelled over transgender jokes controversy" >

[13] URL = <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-suspected-attacking-dave-chappelle-stage-says-show-was-triggering-rcna30057>

things to different people. For Stock and Chappelle respectively, they have responded by re-evaluating where they belong: in Stock's case, she has revived her career by publishing in journals and engaging with social media sites that are favorable to her perspectives; and in Chappelle's case he now plies his trade in comedy clubs and online forums that are willing to host him and his brand of comedy free from censorship. In the case of both these individuals (and others finding themselves in similar situations), one's sense of belonging has had to be recalibrated, in light to unwarranted change of circumstances affecting their ability to feel safe and pursue their respective career paths.

In summation, we can boil down the experience of safety to feeling like nothing bad is going to happen to you with a reasonable degree of certainty and surety. Belongingness provides an added layer of safety, in view of the notion that "there is safety in numbers" (in most cases anyway). That being said, safety can also be experienced without the presence or company of others. Feeling safe is the subjective sense that you are going to be fine; that you are not in any imminent danger; and that you need not invest too much (or indeed any) mental energy toward concerns about harm coming your way. In other words, safety can be understood as *absence* of worry and anxiety about your bodily integrity, peace of mind, and agency being violated.

2.2 The Pillar of Trust

Having established safety as one of the core pillars of belongingness, let us turn our attention now to the next pillar: trust. In many respects, trust goes hand in hand with safety (and acceptance too, as we shall see in the following section). To feel safe, it is imperative I *believe* that my personal well-being is not at risk (imminent or not). Put differently, it means that there is an understanding or expectation (i.e., trust) that I am unlikely to be harmed by others, or that I am not in any immediate danger. Trust, however, covers phenomenological ground beyond the realm of safety (and feelings/experiences thereof). Trust means that I can reasonably and comfortably rely on my

physical and social environment to allow me to persist (and perhaps even thrive) through time, in a place I call home. Hence, trust is another core pillar of belongingness (and experiences thereof). My bodily and psychological integrity hinge on experiences of trust—with others, and with the world around me—such that my life journey can unfold unimpeded.

Trust characterizes an ongoing relationship between an agent and the physical and social environment she inhabits. The nature of this trust is revealed in one's depth of affinity with people and place; for example, the degree of embeddedness of one's habits in the world (Ingerslev 2020). To feel trust at a personal and interpersonal level means that one is not just comfortable in/with one's surroundings, but also imbued with a sense of oneness with it. To clarify, the kind of trust I refer to here pertains to both belonging in nature and belonging in the social world. Humans have a natural tendency towards homophily: the desire to feel in sync with one's environment in a general sense (Au 2023). When one is in sync with one's environment, a form of bonding or coupling has been established. Being coupled to one's environment, one is inclined to participate in it meaningfully: to invest one's time, energy, and resources in pursuit of one's life goals. With trust established, one can proceed with one's life project based on the assumption and expectation that life possibilities are actualizable in a given environment. Thus, there is a normative element to trust (Bernstein 2011), such that one can rest assured that one will be treated appropriately in recognition of one's self-worth.

Trust is a topic that has garnered considerable academic interest in recent decades. According to Cook and Cook (2021), rapid socioeconomic changes in geopolitical affairs post-1989—namely, the spread of globalization and formation of transnational agreements—ushered in a new world order where trust became a valued trait and asset (Cook & Cook 2021: 280). In dealing with an unknown other, whether it be fraternizing in a social setting, engaging in business dealings, or conducting diplomatic negotiations, it is vital that all participants establish an element of trust with respect to one another. Trustworthiness (or lack thereof) can make or break relationships and contracts. The organizational culture of a well-functioning company where staff feel a sense of belonging is predicated on the establishment of collective trust. Indeed, trust is the glue that binds individuals with common interests and

objectives together. Trust is also the social currency that facilitates the co-existence of various ethnocultural communities in a modern liberal democratic society. Moreover, trust of strangers is essential for migrants and refugees, being minorities in environments which encounter them as alien. Before assimilation can take place, members of these minority communities usually seek a sense of belongingness, as a first port of call, with others who share a similar ethnocultural background. It is easier to trust citizens of your country of birth when you are in a foreign land. Establishing trust with familiar others can help with the transition from uprootedness (from one's home country) to groundedness (in one's new adoptive country). Gradually, as one learns to trust the institutions of one's new country of residency (Cook and Cook 2021: 290), perhaps a wider sense of belongingness can begin germinating.

Group dynamics are a good starting place for analyzing how trust operates at the interpersonal level. Trust within communities with a strong sense of belonging tends to develop around shared interests, values, and norms, where members are united by homogenous cultural and identity traits. This sense of belonging grows ever stronger over time with interactions and shared experiences becoming more frequent and involving more participants. Through the lens of culture, we find "a system of possible beliefs, values and history of a people or social group [that] can manifest a worldview as a distinctive way of life" where members of said cultural group may find "a variable social construction of the significance of a given involuntary trait or attribute within a designated socio-political and cultural context" (Fraser-Burgess 2018: 852). Thus, it could be said that by being integrated into a community with shared attributes, an agent calibrates her sense of belongingness through participatory acts that engender feelings of togetherness and in turn a sense of trust (based on experiences thereof). Being able to trust the other means one can reasonably rely on that person to hold up their end of the bargain, so to speak: be it anticipating the repayment of a loan as per previously agreed terms, running with the assumption that a friend refrains from divulging a secret you shared in private, or whatever the case may be. In other words, one's honesty, integrity, and reputation factor into a sense of trust that is

given and received.[14] In this manner, trust is not just a feeling but also a form of social currency that lubricates relationships. A sense of trust is fostered and foisted when members are aware that their belongingness to the group is contingent on their personal reputation being recognized by the wider group as sound and reliable. Castro and Pacherie further observe that

> "reputation and social emotions are scaffolded at least in part by *the need to belong*. The need to belong is a need to maintain social bonds with friends and ingroup members that translates into implicit *obligations and commitments* that help stabilize joint actions and cooperative interactions." (Castro & Pacherie 2021: 7620; emphasis added)

In other words, internal pressure within a group to develop lasting interrelations and cohesion amongst members generates norms which bind members together (Castro & Pacherie 2021: 7621). To this end, trust-seeking motivations goad members to contribute toward a prosocial internal culture within the group. Conversely, members who cause disharmony within the group risk having their reputations tarnished; and the price they pay could include being shunned from the group, resulting in a loss of belongingness. Castro and Pacherie posit the following link between reputation and belongingness:

> "The importance we assign to our reputation, to others' assessments of us and to our credibility are manifestations of a more basic prosocial disposition to engage in long-standing systematic relations with others, that is, the need to belong. The need to belong leads us to engage in certain social interactions and stick to our commitments, but also scaffolds more complex social motivations like reputation management, social emotions and the internalization of group norms that also contribute to explaining adherence to commitment." (Castro & Pacherie 2021: 7622)

From Castro's and Pacherie's analysis of the role of reputation in generating and maintaining a paradigm of interpersonal trust in social settings, we can gather that experiences of trust are not just reassuring but also empowering.

[14] A personal anecdote here might help further illustrate this point. Whereas I am usually a security conscious person, I find myself in a more relaxed state of mind whenever I attend annual heavy metal music festivals such as the Bloodstock Open Air (BOA) festival in the UK: I leave my valuables in my tent, with the expectation that nobody will rob me when I am not present. This is important to me, as I am rarely in or around my tent, spending most of my time at the festival stages watching my favorite bands and in the hangout spaces between bands' sets socializing with my friends. I trust that my belongings will remain intact while away from them, affording me the peace of mind to immerse myself fully in the festival's activities. Given that I have thus far yet to experience thefts, robberies, or other breaches of trust at any of the festivals I have attended, I feel inclined to keep returning to these festivals (and others too), in the hope that this trend persists.

Trust is a two-way street. For trust to develop between parties involved, there must be reciprocal acts that advance mutual interests. When trust exists between an agent and other members of a group, belongingness persists.

Trust not only makes cooperation and friendship possible; it permits the exercise of autonomy, the exchange of knowledge, and the attainment of social goods (McLeod 2023). Societies are built upon the norm of reciprocity, an expectation that the other will act according to their obligations (Bicchieri et al 2021: 42). By placing one's trust in another, one is making oneself vulnerable to the other's betrayal of trust (Carter 2023: 381). Therefore, much is at stake. Breaches of trust can be life-altering: for instance, placing one's kid in the care of a babysitter whose acts of negligence result in serious harm to the kid, putting one's life savings in an investment fund that is embezzled by unscrupulous investors, confiding with friends on a private matter and subsequently discovering that you are being gossiped about in a WhatsApp chat group, and so forth. When trust is broken, it may be difficult to recover from this: relationships and friendships end, one withdraws from the social world, financial losses cannot be recouped, and so on. Distrust is not just unpleasant and undesirable (associated with negative emotions) but also self-limiting (holds one back from advancing one's interests). Furthermore, low levels of societal trust correlate with high crime rates and poorer life outcomes. For communities and societies to function seamlessly, trust must be present.

Indeed, with trust things get done. In order to get what one wants, sometimes it is necessary to take a risk and put one's trust in another – the risk being that the other may bring harm to oneself (Lahno 2017). Nevertheless, the risk is worth taking since it potentially advances one's own interests. Besides, "no man [sic] is an island", as the saying goes. Having a hunch and trusting one's instincts only get you so far in life. For these reasons, people join clubs and societies aligned with one's own goals and interests. In becoming a member of a social group, one stands together with and acts alongside others to achieve similar or shared goals; for instance, a free speech collective or anti-war protest group. Affiliation to a group signifies that one trusts other fellow members to be on the same side and on the same page. Trust is established through life experience – not to mention a fair bit of trial and error. It is therefore imperative that one makes sound choices in selecting in-group membership.

Accordingly, out-group discrimination is a natural part of the human condition, where "population homogeneity favors societal trust, while trust is weaker in ethnically, linguistically, and economically heterogeneous neighborhoods" (Scheller 2021: 50). In a social context, trust is commonly found in adherence to shared norms and cooperation for mutual benefit. Members of social groups and communities more easily identify common traits and thus develop a sense of trust. This sense of trust is reserved for in-group members, and those with whom one is already well acquainted. When outsiders present themselves on the scene, the natural instinct is to have one's guard up and distrust those outside the boundaries of the known, the recognizable, and the familiar (Scheller 2021: 53). And perhaps for good reason, in certain scenarios – say, in times of social unrest or political conflict.

A place that feels homely must necessarily be one that you can *place your trust* in. While trust is typically understood as an interpersonal phenomenon, a place or space that feels homely can also be included within the contextual ambit of where trust can be experienced. Indeed, one's abode is usually the primary setting within which the salience of trust is most clearly affectively discernible and effectively realizable. It stands to reason, then, that one ought to feel at home in one's own home: an extension of one's personhood and identity. With respect to one's dwelling space, it could be said that "[a] house that clears space for dwelling is one that makes room for our journey through time: not temporarily, but continuously, from past to future", meaning that "the house is not subject to some general or abstract time, but itself mediates and makes possible certain experiences of time" (Bormanis 2019: 28). In other words, one's abode is a place or space where one can experience aspects of life in certain ways (e.g., the subjective flow of time), gather oneself appropriately, and take one's time in making sense of the world.

Having a suitable dwelling as a safe place to return or retreat to allows an agent to calibrate her sense of belongingness in the liminal spaces of in-betweenness in life. This is especially pertinent in situations where "the mere stepping out of one's room" feels like "a sort of exodus, in which the movement across a very short distance entails the experience of a dramatic transition between an environment of belonging and one of non-belonging" (Leone 2012: 454). The private space of one's abode can be framed as an intrapersonal

realm in which one roams—physically, mentally, emotionally, and so forth—with general ease and comfort. And we can attribute this ease and comfort to a sense of trust in one's private domain. This sense of trust is especially pertinent if one is, say, dependent on a carefully curated physical space that is conducive to one's needs, owing to physical or other kinds of disability. Without this sense of trust, one experiences diminished agency, where one is impeded in carrying out basic tasks. Trust begins at home, in one's own home. Once trust can be established in one's abode, the task of establishing trust in the social world—by way of extension and transference from the private sphere to the public sphere—becomes more seamless and fluid. A trusted space is therefore one that endures over time and can be relied upon to perpetuate (i.e., remain constant, maintain its character) over the course of one's life journey to facilitate access to and attainment of the required existential goods.

The feeling of trust also extends beyond the dimensional scope and spatial domain of one's abode. For example, trust implicates those in one's social network and others whom we interact with on a regular basis (e.g., trivial encounters with one's neighbors). For local residents on a street or fellow tenants in an apartment building, the feeling of interpersonal trust can be described as a general sense of civility (e.g., cordiality and courtesy in basic interactions, refraining from rummaging through one another's mail, etc.). In identifying with their neighborhood, local residents are coupled—in varying degrees of intensity—to their immediate surroundings in ways that visitors are not, having vested interests in the maintenance of some semblance of social order and cohesion.

Trust, within the ambit of one's living quarters (shared with housemates) or neighborhood, emerges and develops over time by way of interpersonal interactions; and by way of this milieu of cordial interactions, a general sense of trust characterizes this physical and social setting. This general sense of civility affords a local resident/tenant the means to persist through time, in turn "making space for the future to happen in the intimate spaces of belonging we call 'home'" (Bormanis 2019: 31). Given that each agent's threshold of comfort is different, having narrative routines in place—making small talk with neighbors and other ice-breaking activities—allows one to traverse the "frontier between an environment of belonging and one of non-belonging" (Leone 2012: 457).

These frontiers define the boundaries between self-ascribed conceptions of belongingness and nonbelongingness, permitting an agent to navigate the in-between spaces through the course of time. Even a basic degree of civility—for instance, getting on with your neighbors in a friendly and non-quarrelsome member—helps one develop a sense of trust over time, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging in residential settings. In other words, trust is experienced through harmonious relations with others in a given setting. Inhabitants of shared spaces across a geographical expanse, through a reciprocity of courteous social interactions, contribute to the emergence of collective trust.

What does trust-based belongingness look like over a given timeframe? This is a particularly important consideration when belongingness is tied to identity-driven communities. For Baumeister (1986), the sense of continuity across time is a fundamental component of identity; and where the continuity is characterized by change rather than stability, identity becomes precarious, prompting questions of who we are (Baumeister 1986: 45). Sense of continuity gains salience through narrativity, and more often than not reinforced through membership of a community. On the matter of temporal rootedness, Baldwin and Keefer (2020) note that "it reflects an important existential insight into the individual's awareness of themselves in the world that can shift with the contingencies of life" (Baldwin & Keefer 2020: 3089). Grasping the temporal flow through which the succession of events in one's lifetime is experienced links one's past, present, and future together in diachronic unity (Čapek & Loidolt 2021: 228), entrenching one's sense of belonging and continuity thereof.

From the discussions above, we can make a number of inferences about the feeling of trust in relation to ascertaining one's sense of belonging. Firstly, there is indeed something it is like to experience trust through interpersonal encounters. By interacting with others who share our norms, values, and interests, we develop a bond with them; and over time, as the bonds deepen, a sense of trust develops too. As Baldacchino (2011) notes, "[a]t the level of the eidetic of belonging, there is a certain kinship of feeling between family, nation, ethnicity and tribe" (Baldacchino 2011: 96). The bond you feel with someone whom you share certain interests and/or traits with, is one you can indeed visualize (i.e., has cognitive salience) as well as emote (i.e., has visceral salience). A shared character of trust permeating a group or community

encourages practices that reinforce a sense of unity and belonging. Secondly, the feeling of trust diffuses into both the private and public spheres – the intrasubjective and the intersubjective respectively. There are parallels and correlations between the belongingness an agent experiences in her own abode based on intrapersonal trust (the affordances she has curated for herself) and the belongingness she experiences in the social world based on interpersonal trust (the affordances available and accessible to her through group membership). Thirdly, the feeling of trust is intrinsically linked with temporality (the passage of time). We can identify this in the way the strength of one's interpersonal bonds, where the bonds are built on trust, is directly proportionate to the amount of time elapsed. As a bond becomes stronger over time, you may feel more inclined to share more personal/private details about yourself; for instance, your innermost thoughts on how you are doing in life, opinions that you would normally rather keep to yourself, and so forth. When this trust is honored and reciprocated, conferring certain personal benefits, you will likely do the needful to ensure this bond stands the test of time. Fourthly (and finally), trust is often experienced as *absence*: for example, absence of worry or anxiety that someone has malicious intent toward you or that a plan you have put in place (in agreement with others) might fail, affording you cautious confidence in an expected outcome. Trust, understood as such, provides existential certainty and security so crucial for the pillars of belongingness to remain intact.

2.3 The Pillar of Acceptance

So far, I have identified safety and trust as two pillars of belongingness. Let us now turn to a third pillar: acceptance. It should be noted that there is much affective overlap in experiences of safety, trust, and acceptance, in view of similar kinds of interpersonal dynamics being implicated. In order that I feel like I belong, it is imperative that I (a) feel safe from harm, (b) trust others (and likewise feel trusted by them), and (c) feel like I am accepted by others (as I accept them), somewhere. Safety, trust, and acceptance create the right conditions for harmony to arise in a group setting and endure over time.

Feelings of safety draw you in; trust keeps you going; and it is acceptance that reassures you that *you matter* (to others). Or at the very least, that there is *a place for you* there (wherever that may be). In other words, once accepted, nobody is likely to motion for your exclusion or expulsion anytime soon. You can rest assured that wherever it is that you call home, it is where others call home too. *A home for me, for you, and for us.*

Notwithstanding the overlap with safety and trust, acceptance as an experiential dimension of belongingness comprises distinct characteristics. To be or feel accepted means having your presence or membership acknowledged by others, in a group or community of one's preference. When others "recognize us in our *whoness*" and care about us, one's agency is confirmed (Lucas 2019: 718; original emphasis). In the company of those who welcome and accept you, you can simply be yourself: you are free to "do your thing", without fear of reprisal or the discomfort of being judged or stared at. In this manner, "strong communities are connected communities, where people feel they belong, they matter, and their participation is facilitated" (Roffey 2013: 40). Moreover, recognition conferred by others—whom we likewise recognize and care about—affirms our self-worth and self-esteem as a valued member of a community. Members of strong identity-based communities are bonded through "a sense of emotional connection, shared values and inter-dependence between the members of the community" (ibid.). *It matters to me that I matter to you.* How I am seen in the eyes of others (my value and reputation) tells me something about my place in their world, a world which I regard as mine too.

Where there is mutual acceptance, there is harmonious coexistence. Among fellow members of a group or community, there is an absence of worry, stress, or anxiety about being judged, ostracized, or vilified. Thus, an analysis of the feeling of acceptance sheds light on the phenomenon of stigma and the role it plays in group-belongingness based on self-identity – demonstrating how feelings of safety, trust, and acceptance are conceptually interrelated yet phenomenologically distinct. With respect to being accepted (by others) and mattering[15] (to others), this involves proactive engagement with a degree of care accompanied by certain behavioral cues: having someone reach out to you

[15] For a discussion on why mattering matters in consequential ways, see Flett (2022).

(via telephone) or check in on you (in person) to see how you are doing, having someone be there as a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on for you, having someone take your concerns seriously without being ridiculed, and so forth.

Of the three pillars of belongingness discussed thus far (safety, trust, and acceptance), it is acceptance that speaks most to the core of one's identity. Through interactions with others, social fit is assessed. An agent who is particularly averse to rejection and ostracism may be concerned with the negative consequences of failing to fit in. There may be aspects of her identity that make her vulnerable in an environment that is hostile to her self-identity. Take for instance the struggles of an expat who identifies as lesbian living in a country governed by Islamic law, where members of the LGBTQIA+ community face persecution. It would be impossible for her to feel acceptance in such an environment, given that an immutable aspect of her identity is rejected by its sociocultural norms. Who she is—her personal identity—is how she experiences the world. To deny or refuse recognition of someone's identity is, in some sense, to negate their very existence. To tackle the question of social identity in phenomenology, we must recognize that "the person or the self is not something observed and re-identified; if there is an identity to person or self, it is something we experience or, more precisely, something in the way we experience" (Čapek & Loidolt 2021: 228). An agent who is stigmatized for who she is—say, for being lesbian (in terms of both self-identity and group identity)—experiences this rejection at a deeply personal and visceral level. Experiences of rejection lie at the severe end of non-acceptance and leave an indelibly negative mark on the mood and psyche of the affected. For a stigmatized agent, therefore, the endeavor to find a place to belong is fraught with hurdles.

Acceptance thus plays an important role in immunization against stigma. Identity may be a deeply personal/private matter, but it is also very much a matter of social/public interest. And being in the public sphere, identity is also an unavoidable political matter. We presently live in politically fraught times in which there is what Seligman refers to as "a widespread revival of exclusionary, xenophobic, self-referential politics and ways of life" (Seligman 2021: 429). In the Western world, owing to a combination of several geopolitical as well as localized sociopolitical factors, stigmatization appears to be on the rise,

especially against minority and marginalized groups, and the effects are very much palpable:

> "Stigmatization can create a global uncertainty about the quality of one's social bonds in academic and professional domains—a state of belonging uncertainty. As a consequence, events that threaten one's social connectedness, although seen as minor by other individuals, can have large effects on the motivation of those contending with a threatened social identity." (Walton and Cohen 2007: 94)

While the experience of stigmatization is individuated, the phenomenon nonetheless begins at a collective level. Stigmatization is a form a stereotyping: the (often, but not always, unconscious) act of casting aspersions about a group of individuals based on common traits they share *or are perceived to share* (which may well be erroneously attributed).

Accordingly, "for members of socially stigmatized groups, the question "Do I belong?" appears to go hand in hand with the question 'Does *my group* belong?'" (ibid.; emphasis added).[16] Stigmatization on account of group identity brings to the fore issues of social inequalities, prejudices, and disparities in treatment, which—left unresolved—can undermine an agent's comfort and trust in society's institutions (Walton & Cohen 2007: 94). For agents who are socially devalued based on identity, there is a "tendency to gravitate toward spaces inhabited by similar others [which] might simply offer very real protection from social biases and discrimination from the outgroup" (Schmader & Sedikides 2018: 242) – to seek and attain solace and refuge somewhere, against a backdrop of non-acceptance and hostility. Members of marginalized groups experience a more limited form of acceptance more generally than members of non-marginalized groups – with the latter needing not contend with stigmatization (or worse). Thus, in the endeavor to be accepted by society at

[16] I recall how, at the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic, reading and hearing about Chinese people (and Asian people, more generally) being vilified in the media for being virus-carriers made me feel a deep sense of rejection and exclusion (not to mention anxiety as well): being dismissed, discarded, disregarded, disowned, and demonized on account of race/ethnicity, and for somehow being responsible for or associated with the spread of COVID-19. The onset of the epidemic happened to coincide with the start of my stint as an expat living in the UK, while I was still in the throes of getting acquainted with a new physical and social environment, which made the stigmatization of Chinese/Asian people particularly nerve-wracking when navigating public spaces where social encounters are inevitable. I further recall wondering about (and worrying for) fellow newcomers (international students, expats, and migrants) of Chinese/Asian heritage in the UK and their struggles to find acceptance—a sense of belonging even—in such socially fraught and politically charged times, in their endeavor to integrate and potentially call the UK their new home.

large, agents of certain communities may find a range of political intricacies, political forces, and political actors standing in their way.

The politicization of acceptance gives rise to scenarios where acceptance becomes a battleground for the so-called culture wars to play out. Take for instance the politically contentious and tenuous matter of trans athletes being welcomed into women's sports. On one side of the debate, an argument can be made that trans women ought to be welcomed and accepted into women's sports, running with the claim that "trans women *are* women". Here, acceptance takes the form of inclusion (of trans women in women's sports), with "inclusion" being one of the objectives of "DEI" (diversity, equity, and inclusion) measures. On the other side of the debate, critics argue that trans women athletes do not belong in female sports, as they continue inhabiting male bodies, for all intents and purposes remain men, and as such possess inherent physical advantages over athletes who have physically female bodies. There is no easy solution to such an intractable subject: to argue against acceptance and inclusion toward trans athletes and trans individuals in general would be an untenable and morally shaky position to occupy, as it reeks of intolerance and bigotry; but to make a case in favor of acceptance and inclusion also comes with its challenges and perils for the integrity of other ideals we hold dear in society, like fairness and equity in competition rules and standards.[17]

The purpose of raising this politically charged subject here is not to litigate on the merits of the arguments either way, but rather to highlight that, while we can all agree that acceptance is in principle a positively-valenced notion, applying and enforcing the tenets of acceptance in real life is—in practice—a far more challenging and tricky exercise to administer, having to cater for potentially conflicting needs and interests (and all associated intricacies and nuances thereof) such that all parties involved are reasonably appeased. Hence, in the quest for belongingness, the feeling of acceptance is

[17] If trans women do not belong in women's sports (as some would claim), and trans women do not belong in men's sports either (insofar as trans women refusing to compete against biological men is concerned), then where *do* (or perhaps *should*) they belong? Some sports officials and commentators have suggested creating separate categories for trans men and trans women to compete in (either together or severally) – but many trans athletes do not support this idea. Given that acceptance in this situation is operationally ambiguous—there are no obvious and easy solutions or compromises to appease everyone, or indeed any guidelines to even extrapolate solutions/compromises from—the subject of trans athletes (and acceptance or exclusion thereof) makes for an interesting case study deserving further attention and scholarly input.

a necessary but not sufficient component. Acceptance is an ideal worth seeking and striving for, but ultimately impossible to enforce *to the satisfaction of all parties*. Therefore, in a tangible and viable sense, acceptance can only truly exist within in-group settings. Beyond that, acceptance takes the form of tolerance rather than acceptance: if you do not accept me, and the sentiment is mutual, then we ought to consider tolerating each other (for the sake of civility, social harmony, peace of mind, and so on) moving forward (for failure to do so could spell conflict). Within the in-group, where I am accepted, that is where I shall belong (and you, within yours). Acceptance thus operates as a kind of existential armor against the forces of society driving a wedge between us.

The drive for acceptance is a powerful motivating factor for seeking out the company of similarly aligned others. Take for instance someone who identifies as a “metalhead”; i.e., one who enjoys the various genres of music that fall under the ambit of “heavy metal” (e.g., death metal, black metal, doom metal, progressive metal, etc.). A self-professed metalhead tends to have rather niche taste in music, and often prefers fraternizing with those who have similar aesthetic preferences. Being a metalhead is more than a musical preference, however; it is also a way of life. This includes having unconventional tastes in film (horror, occult, *avant garde*), a dark sense of humor, a predilection for alternative lifestyles and fashion choices, and so forth. For these reasons, and more, a metalhead tends to steer away from anything that is “mainstream”. In equal measure, those who do not appreciate metal music—and thus do not “get it” why metalheads engage in the lifestyle choices they do—often find metalheads to be oddballs.

To this end, metalheads often find themselves shunned by their peers, in some cases dwelling on the fringes of society. The social world for a metalhead can appear somewhat unhomelike. For a metalhead to find and feel a sense of belonging, a degree of discernment and rumination is required – for not everyone is welcoming, tolerant, or accepting of those who are “a bit different”, so to speak. From time to time, a metalhead would experience exactly this sort of treatment from members of the general public: being pointed at, given weird looks, watching others slowly back away, and so on. In the company of other metalheads, however, one need not worry about any of this. Concerns about normality versus eccentricity do not—and need not—enter one’s frame of mind.

Within the metalhead community, you generally need not be concerned that something you say or do would be misconstrued (and even if so, you would hope that fellow metalheads would exercise a greater degree of patience, empathy, and understanding in the matter being discussed). Overall, acceptance within the metalhead community is a paramount consideration that features somewhere in a metalhead's horizon of awareness. Considerations of lack of acceptance only appear in the foreground when a metalhead is outside the social parameters of her community. This suggests that the acceptance aspects of belongingness are often implicated in experiences of *absences* of such troubling matters as worry, stress, stigmatization, fear of judgment, and ridicule. In a space of acceptance, you can go about your daily life in your agential capacity – without interference from various societal forces making you feel uneasy and unwelcome, or otherwise give you cause for distress.

Moreover, being accepted and recognized by others whom you care about means being a component of (i.e., included/counted in) something beyond and greater than yourself – knowledge of which is often empowering, encouraging, and inspiring. For a metalhead living in Bristol, The Gryphon—Bristol's (and, more generally, South-West England's) only dedicated heavy metal bar—is the go-to rendezvous spot/space in which one can fraternize with other metalheads. Long-time patrons are known to be welcoming and friendly toward newcomers—including out-of-towners—who quickly become inducted into the Bristol metalhead community. Bristol metalheads frequently gather at The Gryphon throughout the week as a place in which they can unwind and recharge, in the company of like-minded individuals. Metalheads are genuinely affable, good-natured, and down-to-earth folk who have thick skin yet gentle hearts. You can generally have a conversation with a metalhead about any topic, and they are likely to listen without taking offence and without judgment.[18] Moreover, being an active member of the local metal scene comes with certain social benefits, such as being invited to social events (e.g., a local metalhead's

[18] The (global) metalhead community tends to attract those who are fair-, curious-, and open-minded. After all, many metalheads have experienced some form of ostracism or stigmatization in their lifetimes. Furthermore, many metalheads have obscure hobbies and interests which drive them to seek out company and companionship within underground scenes. Those who are feeble- or narrow-minded (e.g., prudes who find risqué material and confronting topics disconcerting or offensive) are likely to fritter away from the metalhead scene at some point in time. Thus, certain self-selecting social processes take form and play out organically in/around the metalhead community, in terms of those who stick around and those who go elsewhere.

birthday party), upcoming music festivals, and so forth. The more regular the participation in social events (such as those at The Gryphon), the greater the sense of belonging to the Bristol metalhead community. Thus, a case can be made for a self-reinforcing correlation between participation and acceptance in the experience of belongingness. The more an agent participates, the more she is accepted; and the more she is accepted, the more she participates; and so on and so forth. Feelings of trust, safety, and acceptance are frequently reported by veterans of, and newcomers to, the metalhead scene alike, who find themselves attending gig/festivals and other related events regularly and enthusiastically, thus generating a strong sense of belonging together with fellow metalheads based on enjoyable, enriching, and bond-building shared experiences. When friendships form and evolve through shared love of metal music, members of such social networks tend to seek out opportunities for co-experiencing metal-related activities and events together, including spreading the word on social media about upcoming gigs/festivals and reaching out to fellow metalhead to invite them along (or check if they have already purchased tickets). As metalheads *look forward to* shared experiences of collective musical interests, they likewise *look out for* one another; for instance, ensuring that so-and-so does not miss out on such-and-such, thereby obviating someone's FOMO-related feelings of being left out or forgotten. What this example of belongingness within the metalhead scene shows is that being accepted implicates more than simply having others be cordial to you; it is more saliently about others—who consider you *one of them*—being available to spare you a thought. Thus, the feeling of acceptance provides additional benefits, being linked with positive affirmations of one's self-worth and self-esteem.

The "having-someone-look-out-for-you" aspect of acceptance shines a light on how acceptance is unlike the other harmony-inducing experiences (safety and trust) in the sense that, whereas safety is largely defined by negation (e.g., the absence of threats) and trust is largely defined by affirmation (e.g., reliability, dependability, expectations etc. being present/fulfilled), acceptance implicates both negatory and affirmatory components – the former of which I have already discussed (acceptance being a buffer against stigma). As for the latter—the affirmatory component of acceptance—we can return to the example of the metalhead community. Among fellow metalheads, to be or

feel accepted means having we-experiences of oneness and togetherness through shared musical and aesthetic sensibilities. Metalheads spend a lot of time together, oftentimes with others who are strangers (to begin with) – for example, at multi-day metal festivals such as the annual Bloodstock Open Air Festival (BOA) in Derbyshire in the UK. Attendees at BOA immerse themselves in a four-day camping experience with over 20,000 other metalheads from around the UK and all over the world, together in one social setting to enjoy the performances of over 120 bands. As a fellow metalhead and regular attendee at BOA, I have experienced firsthand a sense of acceptance within this festival environment. Conversations are started seamlessly, and new friendships are easily forged – with one another's band t-shirts often acting as icebreakers (e.g., commenting on such-and-such band and one's favorite tracks of theirs). This level of acceptance and camaraderie extends to the mosh pits—spaces close to the stage where metalheads headbang, jump about, and move around with greater intensity and ferocity—where one finds oneself in close proximity to throngs of strangers (and in closer proximity to strangers that one might otherwise find intrusive and uncomfortable in physical settings beyond the metal festival environment). The reason I am having a good time, is because you are having a good time as well. And it is important to me that we are having a good time *together*. After all, these good times we are having together are more enjoyable than any fun or joy I can possibly derive from solo experiences of headbanging to the same tunes, in my room, all alone – removed from (and deprived of) all the cheering and screaming that accompanies the adrenaline rush of, and shared excitement in, experiencing live music together. These we-experiences add something positive and meaningful to the life of a metalhead – a status that being/feeling accepted among fellow metalheads offers.

The notion of acceptance was put to the test during the tragedy in 2007 that was the murder of Sophie Lancaster,[19] who was viciously attacked after going to her boyfriend's aid (he ended up in a coma as well, but thankfully survived) – their only "crime" being that they dressed like goths (i.e., are likely members of this sub-culture). For many years thereafter, the UK metal community felt very much on edge: "Am I next?", some likely wondered. As a tribute to Sophie Lancaster, the BOA Festival is held on and around the 11th of

[19] URL = https://www.kerrang.com/features/sophie-lancasters-legacy/.

August each year—the anniversary of Lancaster's murder—with one of the stages at the festival (the Sophie Lancaster Stage) dedicated to featuring up-and-coming talents. Each year, attendees at the Bloodstock festival are reminded of how comforting and liberating it is to be in the company of fellow metalheads, and how perilous it can be "out there", away from the metalhead community – simply by being who you are, dressing as you do, in the general public. Metalheads empathize with Lancaster's plight as they can put themselves in her shoes and identify with her struggles with acceptance by mainstream society. As agents embedded in a world of sociality, where battle lines are sometimes drawn, "part of our social experience involves identifying ourselves with groups, and our relationship to these groups is not one of observation from the outside but one of membership and participation" (Carr 2021: 347). From the point-of-view of a non-metalhead, peering in from the outside (so to speak), it may be difficult to grasp the magnitude of what it means for a stigmatized and marginalized individual to find acceptance in the company of her peers. From the point-of-view of metalhead, this is oftentimes all too real.

The example of the metalhead experiencing acceptance within the metalhead community highlights the internal versus external—in-group versus out-group—dynamics of acceptance. Looking outwards from within the metalhead community, the outside world can seem like a cold, hostile, and unwelcome place at times – thus giving belongingness-inducing acceptance within the metalhead community its salience. The takeaway from this case study is that *acceptance has boundaries*.[20] And these boundaries are primarily defined by identity. Various identity-based groups coexist side by side in wider society. However, from time to time, conflicts may arise among certain groups. In times of conflict, therefore, in-group acceptance is experienced as ever more conspicuous and regarded as ever more germane.

The feeling of acceptance on account of identity demonstrates that belongingness is (to a large extent) a reflection, representation, and extension of who we are inherently, where "the self is constructed as an internalized and evolving life story which organizes disparate events into a coherent and purposeful narrative about who one is and what life is about" and where "we

[20] Note that navigating these boundaries often entails safety and trust being put to the test as well, in negotiating one's place/stake in sociocultural spaces afforded by a given environment.

understand ourselves as living an unfolding story over time" (Baldwin & Keefer 2020: 3072). Again, being accepted means having your identity and self-worth affirmed. Acceptance (and absence thereof) and the associated push and pull factors mitigate the extent to which you feel a sense of homelikeness. Positive interactions draw you in: you feel close(r) to a particular crowd, participating in conversations and activities more eagerly and seamlessly. Conversely, negative interactions repel you, rendering you disinclined to put yourself out there with the same vigor next time; and if you do, it can seem like a real chore.

For someone whose lifestyle is more transient—say, a diplomat who is posted to different locations around the globe—the notion of home (and homeliness) is more akin to "interaction rather than the usual assumption that home refers to a geographical location, usually one's origin" (Madison 2016: 28). To this end, the term "existential migration" was coined by Madison (2016) to refer to "a powerful need to pursue one's personal potential by maximizing freedom, independence and choice" (Madison 2016: 29). Furthermore, belongingness becomes an especially pertinent consideration in the face of "an unexpected unsettledness in response to […] the 'culture shock' of fundamental life assumptions being challenged and exposed as contingent" (Madison 2016: 29). Accordingly, push factors can be particularly troublesome for

> "'the one' in the family who didn't quite fit in, never felt accepted, and always stood slightly apart from a sense of community. This experience is painful and confusing. But the rejection can go in both directions, with these migrants feeling somewhat superior to a home culture that felt too homogeneous, conventional, or provincial." (Madison 2016: 31)

Indeed, for an agent who struggles with fitting in and feeling accepted, being a newcomer in a foreign environment—for instance, in the case of a refugee—there is additional impetus impelling her to seek acceptance in homelike places where she is welcomed without hostility or apprehension. Over time, when a refugee gradually integrates in her new environment, meeting other refugees along the way, what emerges is "the phenomenon of the group becoming conscious of itself as a community, capable of we-intentionality manifested in experiences, feelings and projects" (Carr 2021: 349). In this manner, one finds solace in and camaraderie with others with relatable life paths and trajectories.

Based on the foregoing analysis, we can make the following claims about the feeling of acceptance. Firstly, feeling accepted pertains to fundamental aspects of a person's identity. Whether it be immutable characteristics or lifestyle choices, a sociocultural environment that is hostile to these aspects of a person is likely to generate feelings of rejection rather than acceptance; and as a corollary of this, experiences of unbelongingness. Secondly, the degree to which a person feels accepted depends on the extent to which she—and the group she identifies with—is stigmatized. A lesbian individual living in an LGBTQIA+ unfriendly country is unlikely to feel the same level of acceptance—and therefore belongingness—outside the confines of her community, in comparison to what she experiences within it. Thirdly, the role of stigma in generating feelings of acceptance or rejection reveals a deep correlation between personal identity and social-identity-conscious group-belongingness. The characteristics and traits pertaining to an individual's identity will always bear upon the types of relations and interactions she has with the world at large, which in turn determine the social affiliations she pursues and maintains.

In this regard, the feeling of acceptance is perhaps the most precarious of all the belongingness-related pillars analyzed thus far, given that acceptance rests on several external factors and elements that lie in the realm of national-political narratives and geopolitics more widely, along with various other societal forces pushing against and pulling on an agent as she navigates the social world. Moreover, the feeling of acceptance sheds light on the importance that intersubjectivity—the relations and dynamics between oneself and others—plays in assessing and making sense of experiences of belongingness.

2.4 The Pillar of Familiarity

The journey to belong involves careful and calculated navigation of social settings and shared spaces. In the realms of social interactions, push and pull factors can make you feel at home or make you feel unwelcome. Lived experiences that draw you in or push you away leave emotional footprints on

the landscape of your inner world. Whether or not your environment feels homelike depends on the degree of safety, trust, and acceptance that exists between you and the social world you navigate and inhabit. A homelike space or place is also one that is familiar to you. By familiarity, I refer to features of an environment (sights, sounds, symbols, objects, etc.) as well as social practices (norms, rituals, customs, conventions, traditions, etc.) that provide you with surety, ease, and comfort in living out your life. These features and practices offer clues to the homelikeness of the spaces you navigate and places you inhabit. An environment that you recognize and acknowledge as familiar is one that affords you a sense of seamlessness and automaticity in movement. In other words, you likely possess the requisite knowhow to get around freely and easily, without resorting to much forethought and planning, in an autopilot-like manner. Think of the usual walking and public transports routes you take travelling between work and home. Given how familiar you are with the physical environment, you sometimes find yourself multitasking while navigating known spaces (e.g., texting someone, fidgeting with your headphones, digging through your backpack to find a condom, etc.), indicating the extent to which your acquaintance with your surroundings permits you to redirect your attention.

The litmus test for familiarity is the ease of navigation in one’s stomping ground. In familiar territory, possibilities for action abound – what Gibson (1966) refers to as “affordances”. Affordances reveal how well tethered you are to your environment. Picture yourself being someplace that you frequent regularly. When an environment is familiar, there is a degree of pre-givenness regarding what to expect in a certain social situation. I can find my way around the central city and various suburbs with relative ease. I know which shops to visit for certain material goods, and I can get there using shortcuts if need be. Social expectations of what is appropriate and what is possible are second nature to me. For example, whenever I travel back to my hometown of Auckland, New Zealand for a visit, I know my way around and can engage in banter with strangers on the street, if need be, in a manner that is effortless to me: I am acquainted with the local social cues, the “street lingo” and regional slang, the “inside jokes” about Aucklanders that fellow Aucklanders are familiar with (e.g., the “JAFA”—just another fucking Aucklander—jibe that non-Aucklanders level at us, only partially in jest we think), and so forth. Auckland was where I was

domiciled—my stomping ground—for most of my life. Navigating my way around the streets and social spaces will always be relatively straightforward, seeing as how I have a mental map of familiar routes and locations imprinted in my mind through my memories. Each time I make my way around my stomping ground, a sense of strangeness or uncanniness is not present. I find myself able to move and act pre-reflectively, in a manner that would not be possible in a strange, foreign, and unfamiliar setting (for example, on foreign travels as a tourist, or indeed anywhere that is not my stomping ground).

The analogy above showcases how the experience of familiarity is one that encapsulates both absence and presence: the absence of uncanniness that would otherwise stop you in your tracks, coupled with the presence of flow or fluidity in navigation affording redirection of your attention to other matters, assured in the likelihood that you will not be stopped in your tracks or interfered with by features of the natural/social environment, and so on. Thus, familiarity in a homelike setting means having the knowhow and agential capacity to go about your business with confidence, self-assuredness, and certitude – what Roberts and Osler (2024) refer to as "social certainty": an "ever-present but usually unnoticed feature of ordinary experience … that lies in the background of our dealings with others and underpins our sense of being an agent in a world of distinctively social opportunities" (Roberts & Osler 2024: 1). Social certainty can be further understood as the absence of apprehension and hesitancy holding you back from interacting with the social world with the usual adeptness and seamlessness.

Now for a twist to the above example. Imagine a scenario where that which was once familiar to you henceforth appears unhomelike. For instance, your hometown is certainly familiar to you, but at some stage in your life you may find yourself no longer feeling totally mentally immersed or emotionally invested in your home turf: perhaps you have outgrown the place. For instance, you find yourself having moved on from the high school friends you grew up with; they are content remaining domiciled there, whereas you wish to spread your wings and see the world.[21] Thus, the pull factors are weak, and the push

[21] Having lived in New Zealand most of my life, I used to wonder why so many Kiwis (New Zealanders) are happily domiciled in New Zealand, exhibiting no desire to leave or even see the world – like frogs happily perched at the bottom of a well, hopping about in the same old familiar territory, over and over again, time after time. Presently, having left the country (hopefully for

factors are strong. Your hometown is no longer where you wish to be on a long-term basis: it ceases to represent your interests or serve your needs, you cease to identify with the place (perhaps as an extension of who you are), and the interactions and events that occur there have become less meaningful and exciting to you. It feels like you ought to be—i.e., find *a better version* of belongingness—elsewhere: *a new somewhere* you (have reason to) believe the grass is greener. Hence, in certain situations, it may well be the case that, even if one's environment continues to feel familiar, it may nonetheless be the case that it is no longer experienced as homely/homelike, being encountered as ill-affording one's revised and revitalized future life plans and goals.

In other words, a world that once was your stomping ground henceforth no longer feels or appears conducive to who you are at that present moment moving forward (your current self as it is, entering into the future), as opposed to who you were in a previous stage in your life. Perhaps your needs, desires, and goals have evolved. Your environment may not have changed, but *you* certainly have. And only upon deeper reflection and introspection does this internal shift become obvious. We respond to environmental cues (affordances) around us in unconscious or subconscious ways, some of which may be relevant in one's cost-benefit analysis of reaching out to alluring spaces:

> As creatures of practical skill, we respond to certain affordances of our surroundings pre-reflectively. The individual's responsiveness to affordances is experienced as an affective allure, which means that we are simply either drawn or repulsed by something, without or before being consciously aware of this. (Ingerslev 2020: 485)

Gibson's theory of affordances provides us with an explanatory framework within which the intersubjective dynamics (self-and-other, self-and-world) governing experiences of belongingness can be described in language familiar to psychologists, psychiatrists, and philosophers alike. Ingerslev's insights here, drawing on Gibson's work on affordances, suggest that there are certain habits that are preconceived and autochthonous to each agent, which keep her grounded and attuned to her prescribed way of life. Moreover, "habits can

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good), a related thought recently occurred to me, in musing about cases of those (like myself, and others, who have departed) who yearn for broader horizons: how can one spread one's wings and soar to new heights, in the land of the flightless bird (i.e., the Kiwi bird)? Then it hit me: familiarity to some might be comfortable (and comforting), but to others it could mean "the same old boring shit *again*". In other words, one person's recurrent mundanity is another person's dreary monotony.

return to us as existential questions and lead us to experiential derealization; who did this; why do I keep doing this; or why do I keep remembering this or forgetting that?" (Ingerslev 2020: 486). Ritualized ways of interacting with our surroundings mediate the affordances activatable. Thus, while the "capacity to experience the same familiar world rests not on some explicit acts of my mind (remembering memories), but on my habitualized ways to perceive and move" (Čapek & Loidolt 2021: 227), these behaviors rooted in established routines and habits only serve an agent insofar as they remain relevant. The feeling of familiarity is therefore rather more like a means to an end than an end in itself. These attributes of familiarity lend weight to the notion that belongingness is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses several components, of which familiarity is just one – but a vital and irreplaceable one at that.

Now let us consider how familiarity functions for an agent in a foreign land. Take for instance someone who is a recent arrival in a city (e.g., a student or expat). Place-bound familiarity is no longer salient; instead, the grasping for homely comforts relies on new social interactions for fulfilment. Therefore, in a disruptive state of transition,

> "the 'migrating body' becomes elaborated by each culture it experiences. Subsequently this 'excessively complicated' experiential body is no longer congruent enough with any one place to feel like it 'fits in'. It has developed more intricately than any one culture – no one place can hold the interactions this body now implies. No place feels like home anymore, except in temporary moments. In this sense, for some people at least, 'home' becomes a momentary self-world *interaction*, not a set geographic place." (Madison 2016: 30; original emphasis)

To this end, belongingness extends beyond a connection between person and place, encompassing the interactional dynamics between oneself and others throughout the social sphere. Thus, belongingness-inducing familiarity would be difficult to experience in the absence of adequate social connections.

To illustrate, consider what it is like, from the point of view of an international student, dealing with her new environment. Imagine that this person does not possess fluency in the English language. Basic everyday tasks that we (those of us who are native/fluent English speakers) engage in—and take for granted—become onerous chores for these individuals. When international students arrive in the UK, and thereafter become acquainted with

other international students with whom they share a similar cultural background, they likely feel moments of belonging in their interactions with one another; for instance, attending classes together, sharing meals together, socializing on weekends, and so forth. Experiences of this nature become existential lifelines for foreigners integrating themselves in foreign lands. With others to navigate a new environment with, you are less likely to feel awkward or out of place.

An oft-cited case in which familiarity breaks down is culture shock. With aspects of an alien environment seemingly incongruous and inscrutable, you find yourself unsure how to conduct yourself. Indeed, against a backdrop of unfamiliarity and strangeness in a foreign land, an everyday activity usually otherwise engaged in unconsciously takes on new appearance and form thereafter. As a newcomer, you are confronted with the uncanny wherever you go. This can be unsettling and unnerving. Experiences of unfamiliarity capture a variety of moods and emotions, ranging from the more superficial (e.g., bewilderment, freezing up, etc.) to the more intense (e.g., shame, public humiliation, etc.). At the lower end of the scale, being unfamiliar with the cityscape may include going in the wrong direction or mixing up names of establishments. At the higher end of the scale, being unfamiliar with local customs and lingo may mean inadvertently committing an act of faux pas that invites jest and ridicule among locals, making you feel rather silly.

Moreover, prolonged periods of unfamiliarity and regular encounters with the uncanny may conjure up feelings of unhomelikeness that seemingly eject you from the world around you. Attempts at "getting into the groove" may feel tedious, unnatural, and disorientating: your movements are clunky, your speech is nervous, your demeanor is awkward, and your heartrate is irregular. Unfamiliarity renders you somewhat vulnerable and doubtful in social settings. It can feel as though you stick out like a sore thumb – making it abundantly clear you do not belong. However, in the company of others experiencing the uncanny, the strangeness of the new environment dissipates somewhat. Together with others, navigating novelty is less unnerving. Think of the times when, as a kid, you got lost in a shopping mall while on your own, compared to the times you got lost together with your friends. By co-experiencing unfamiliar environments with familiar others, the burden of social uncertainty is attenuated.

Note that there are layers to the degree of familiarity one emotes. As a native Aucklander, I feel a sense of belonging when I visit my stomping ground: the geographical landmarks are familiar to me, I recognize the local lingo on the streets, I can find my way around the city's main districts without relying on GPS technology, and so forth. A tourist in Auckland will not be able to access such a sense of belonging, as the environment will be new and unfamiliar to her. However, on account of her being a visitor, the lack or absence of a sense of belonging will not be of much consequence to her. Perhaps the strangeness, uncanniness, and weirdness may present themselves as exciting to her. Moreover, given the temporary nature of her presence in Auckland, generating a sense of belonging is unlikely to be a concern of hers. In fact, experiences of unbelongingness—say, in the form of culture shock—may even be encountered as enjoyable (perhaps as a kind of personal challenge, like trying weird local delicacies, then capturing and uploading the experience on TikTok).

Think of how some agents get a rush of adrenaline from putting themselves in risky and unusual situations. There are all kinds of activities that tourists engage in while on holiday, that they may not otherwise venture into back on their home turf: getting drunk with complete strangers, trying an illicit substance or extreme sport for the first time, having one-night stands or participating in spontaneous orgies, and so forth. Immersing oneself in the unfamiliar and the unknown can, under certain circumstances, indeed be horizon-expanding and thus uplifting experiences. To sum up, context matters in determining how you encounter familiarity and unfamiliarity as either pleasant or unpleasant in a variety of different social and physical settings/environments.

For an international student or expat, as opposed to a tourist, the stakes are different. This individual has likely committed to being domiciled in her new city of residence for a considerable period of time (several years, at least, in most cases), and thus would likely take it upon herself to familiarize with and acclimatize to her new surroundings. It would matter to her that she settles and fits in, to some reasonable extent, in order for her stay to run smoothly. As such, she may avoid being dragged into uncomfortable and risky new experiences. Moreover, she would require some salient forms of access to certain life opportunities that will make her stay palatable and agreeable. (The stakes are even higher for someone who has migrated permanently, looking to

entrench and embed herself in what has become her new country of residence). The uncanniness faced by the tourist vis-à-vis the international student or expat is likewise present; however, this takes on a different form and magnitude of impact and significance. The tourist departs the foreign land after a temporary stint, back to her homeland and milieu of familiarity. The international student or expat, on the other hand, faces the daunting task of making a new home out of the foreign land she presently resides in.

Unfamiliar sights and sounds may be sources of intrigue and amusement for a tourist, who can weave these into anecdotal narratives—tales of adventure—when she has safely returned home. However, for the international student or expat, unfamiliar surroundings could be sources of discomfort and shyness, translating into unwillingness to participate enthusiastically in further social encounters. Thus, finding a sense of belonging matters to an international student or expat in ways that are inconsequential for a tourist. Being removed from her friends and family—her circle of familiarity—back in her country of origin, an international student or expat may experience a sense of estrangement in the early stages of her settling in her new homeland. In due course, it is hoped that the uncanniness of her surroundings subsides as she becomes acquainted and integrated with her new surroundings. Moreover, experiences of culture shock could have a positive effect in terms of producing lessons for future reference – for instance, reflecting on the social norms that one takes for granted (Roberts & Osler 2024: 11-12), and interpreting instances of culture shock as the nudge (Pettigrew 2023) one needs to step outside one's comfort zone and make a genuine attempt to engage with locals meaningfully. The more familiar a person is with her natural/social environment, the more likely she is to participate in what it has to offer; and the greater her levels of participation in what her natural/social environment has to offer, the more likely she is to experience a sense of belonging in due course.

Based on the foregoing, we can deduce that synchronization—participatory familiarization—with one's environment is a key feature of belongingness, where "the structures beyond the home through which we move, which we share with the people who share our world, which form part of our 'neighborhood', so to speak, are just as much implicated in our sense of belonging" (Bormanis 2019: 26). Furthermore, agents likely "feel at home in

these places because they have the habits and practices that correspond to them", the result being that "they feel in sync with such places" (Bormanis 2019: 25). Furthermore, homelike qualities take on features that facilitate dwelling: "the first is a sense of security and continuity, which implies a relatively stable future; the second related point is that such security and continuity extend beyond the scope of the home or shelter itself, into both our politics and culture" (Bormanis 2019: 28). At a baseline, one's dwelling is usually the default space in which one feels a sense of familiarity; this homeliness can be extended to any environment in which an agent can be her authentic self and act in autopilot mode. In a familiar setting, where you can be yourself, chances are that you enjoy some semblance of stability and in turn a sense of homelikeness.

The salience with which a landscape of familiarity presents itself to an agent depends on three key factors: its temporal character, the degree of willingness of the agent to participate, and the affordances present in the environment that are accessible to the agent. The act of spending time somewhere, interacting with others, and making the most of what the place has to offer, all lend themselves to creating a sense of homelikeness for the agent. Familiarity, then, is the pillar that provides material and affective certainty for the persistence of one's identity into the future. Homelikeness begins disintegrating when social doubt seeps in over time. The passage of time elucidates the content of belongingness as experienced by the agent, the extent to which it exists, and what makes this salient for the agent. The subjective experience of time filters what matters to an agent across her life journey, and what matters for her life story. In this regard, perhaps another component of familiarity is *being familiar with oneself and one's needs*. Familiarity with oneself means being cognizant of what one must do in order to persist over time as an authentic agent and poised to carry out requisite courses of action in furtherance of these objectives.

The significance of the temporal dimension of familiarity is revealed through narratives: narratives which enable an agent to account for the sequence of events, experiences, and encounters as they unfold over time in such a way that make sense subjectively and retrospectively (Carr 2021: 343). Narratives underwrite an agent's orientation to the world; they chart her story,

help her make sense of life’s struggles, and provide phenomenological threads with which sense-making meaning-making may be woven:

> “The idea of life as a constant struggle to craft a narrative identity, while repeatedly having to revise and update it, makes sense only if we accept the premise of the view that living life is like telling a story, or more properly, like living and acting out a story.” (Carr 2021: 345)

In the formation of one’s self-construal, one seeks to embed oneself in the wider social context, such that “the ‘we’ with which I identify myself, and in whose actions, decisions, and thoughts I share or participate, is something real” (Carr 2021: 347). To have a stake in something—being able to grasp its realness—denotes a personal sense of ownership, the same way an item that belongs to you (a personal belonging) has value, meaning, and use to you. You care about it, cherish it, and maintain its perpetuity as far as possible. The same applies with respect to your reputation, your career, your lifestyle, and various other aspects of your social world that constitute your sense of belonging and your perceived place in the world. A homelike, familiar environment is one worth investing in emotionally and materially, given the rewards to be reaped.

Familiarity, even if/when established, does not last forever. At some point, familiarity may become unstuck. Indeed, changes in the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment cause alterations to environmental cues, rendering the continuation of an agent’s prescribed way of life henceforth untenable. Imagine you live in a rural part of a city and enjoy the serenity and peace of mind that being closer to nature (and away from the hustle and bustle of inner-city life) affords; and over the course of time, this tranquillity is shattered by an influx of tourists. Additionally, your friends and family gradually relocate to more urban dwellings over time, leaving you as one of the last remaining residents in your locale. As a result, your umwelt of familiarity ceases to have the same homely appeal as you previously enjoyed. Consequently, you now find yourself in a position where

> “there is no diachronic unity of a personal habit without a familiar surrounding world of this habit; and if someone undergoes a change of identity (in a sense to be specified), this is obviously also related to what he or she faces, experiences, and undergoes. Events such as a serious illness or the loss of a loved one have an impact on our personal identity. Hence, both personal continuity and personal change must be

understood against the background of the world, its stability and events." (Čapek & Loidolt 2021: 228-229)

Changes of circumstances and new life events alter the course of one's life, skewing or perhaps even abrogating the trajectory of continuity of belongingness. To this end, the disruption to one's way of life is often a painful and alienating experience. The person may experience diminished access to affordances that were once familiar and readily available. Social ties become undone as friends and colleagues move away. Going clubbing on weekends no longer feels the same, as the social group shrinks. Dinner parties no longer occur as frequently either. Meanwhile, your local township becomes unrecognizable over time with an influx of not just tourists but new residents. The idyllic physical setting of where you reside is shattered over time.[22] Uncanniness has taken root where there was once familiarity.

Experiences of familiarity and unfamiliarity reveal our place in the world and our orientation toward its givenness. These experiences test how well-equipped we are in adapting to changing existential circumstances. Thus,

> "when familiar and seemingly self-evident standards are no longer responsive to reality and alternative understandings are not yet in place, then we should cultivate an orientation toward life that enables us to be the finite, fragile, and vulnerable beings that we are. And this is the unfinished, open-ended, ongoing thrown project of being human" (Altman 2016: 461).

Like the feeling of safety—and unlike the other feelings (of acceptance, freedom, trust, and significance), which require deeper rumination and reflection—the feeling of familiarity provides an agent with immediate affective access to her status of belongingness. In other words, the familiarity or otherwise of one's environment can be deduced from fairly rudimentary considerations. We are, after all, creatures of habit who enjoy our inveterate comforts, curating spaces for seamless activation of affordable conveniences.

When familiarity is jeopardized, in a similar fashion to safety being threatened, the environmental cues and clues are often obvious and discernible without much further internal deliberation. Thus, on one hand, familiarity—like

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[22] Consider a recent example where residents of the holiday village of Menorca in Spain have turned hostile to tourists after being overwhelmed by their sheer numbers: URL = <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13405313/Menorca-holiday-village-British-tourists-bans-visitors.html>

safety—is a basic notion to grasp, invoking relatively straightforward considerations. However, the feeling of familiarity also encompasses deeper, more profound considerations about personal flourishing and right fit – notions which give rise to questions about belongingness and the continuity of one's access to the necessary existential goods. Whether it is a matter of an agent being attuned to her environment, or the environment facilitating an agent's desired way of life, belongingness-inducing familiarity requires time and effort to cultivate. To this end, familiar objects that convey symbolic meaning may help belongingness to take root over time (Thomas 2021: 280). Note, for instance, how objects of value and significance that form part of rituals and conventions reinforce a sense of preservation and perseverance of community.

An environment in which an agent feels at home, is one she likely identifies with on a deeper, more fundamental level. To this end, identity-formation—the act of *identifying with*—can be understood in terms of social location: "drawing a picture of a social landscape and locating ourselves in that picture" (Ásta 2018: 118). To feel a bond with a place, one must be able to place oneself there. And in *placing oneself somewhere*, one necessarily narrativizes these lived experiences: to oneself, and to others. To the extent that an agent manages to identify with her new environment—a connection that takes time and effort to cultivate—there are stories to be told of how she might be able to build a new life for herself moving forward.

The process of familiarizing oneself with one's new environment is a necessary capacity-building component in the endeavor to enact homelikeness. This process is rich in revelatory content; and "[g]iven that time is so fundamental to construction and maintenance of a self, it is crucial to study how individuals identify with the present narrative self and its trajectory toward the future" (Baldwin & Keefer 2020: 3073) in narrativizing homelike pastures of belonging as either meaning-infused (positive), meaning-barren (neutral), or meaning-deficient (negative). In other words, the stories we tell about our present lived experiences pave the way for new life opportunities to unfold – possibilities to be made sense of across dimensions of affectivity, valence, and veridicality. This "present narrative self" steers the agent through the world into the future, maintaining continuity of her identity through the passage of time. The act of immersing oneself in an environment reflective of one's identity—an

environment one *identifies with*—through narrative means creates possibilities for spaces to become *homely* (or *homelier*, as the case may be), on account of the fact that I can *place myself (t)here*.

Indeed, if I can see myself someplace where I can call home and be my authentic self there, it is likely I feel comfortable and motivated to participate in whatever this environment has to offer. Making an effort to "re-appropriate meaning and familiarity in a world that is seemingly escaping [one's] control" (Dürrschmidt 2000: 58) helps embed and entrench oneself deeper and further. A point in time is reached at which familiar spaces and narrative identities intertwine. As a result, narrative threads and experiential threads become interwoven in the fabric of familiarity. An interesting inference we can make from this insight, is that *narrativity mediates familiarity*. In other words, as I narrativize my place in a particular setting, reading myself into spaces (placing myself here, there, and somewhere) and tagging memories and personal reflections (like mental post-it notes/memos) onto certain objects and locations, my affective immersion in this environment manifests through enhanced atmospheres of familiarity soliciting increased participation. With the passage of time, as I heed the calls for greater immersion and participation, embedding and entrenching myself deeper and further still, I soon notice *ever more of me in the world, and ever more of the world in me*.

In summary, an environment is homelike and familiar in view of it being affectively scaffolded such that "we project our emotions upon our personal objects, and thus 'extend' our selves beyond our bodies – to possessions or objects that we feel somehow *represent* us" (Piredda 2020: 562; emphasis added). Familiarity provides us with reassurances and comforts through objects that "elicit positive affective reactions, and where we feel somehow reflected in the objects that we choose to surround ourselves with" (ibid.). This passage substantiates what I stated earlier in relation to deeper/further embeddedness and entrenchment in a world that becomes more meaningful as it becomes more familiar and indeed more *familiarizable* through narratives reading ourselves into homely and homelike spaces/places. Familiar objects, people, and events emanate positive emotional resonance and thus provide affective grounding and scaffolding for those seeking a place to call home.

2.5 The Pillar of Freedom

Having familiarized ourselves with familiarity through various affective and experiential possibilities, we are free to explore the fifth and final core pillar of belongingness: freedom. In a sense, freedom (much like safety) appears to be a relatively straightforward concept to grasp. After all, who wouldn't want to be free (or, put differently, who would choose to be unfree)? But when we begin to ask what freedom is—and what it means to be free—we find that this notion is far more complex than we realize. For the purpose of interrogating the phenomenon of belongingness, the notion of freedom I employ here is *personal* (rather than, say, political) freedom – and this freedom has a dual meaning. In other words, there are two fundamental attributes regarding how freedom is operationalized: positive freedom ("freedom *to*") and negative freedom ("freedom *from*"). Positive freedom is synonymous with liberty and authenticity: the right—and capacity—to be yourself (i.e., your true self), and to pursue your goals and dreams. Negative freedom, on the other hand, means being uninhibited and unrestrained (e.g., being free from government interference or public ridicule, being free from groupthink and the social pressures of conformity, and so forth). Positive freedom and negative freedom are, for all intents and purposes, flipsides of the same coin.

Accordingly, to truly be free, one must be simultaneously free to do *x* and free from *y*. For example, for an academic to enjoy freedom of expression, she must be both free to publish on any topic and free from harassment and censorship by mobs of naysayers. For one's freedom to exist, threat minimization efforts must work in tandem and concordance with actualizable possibilities for action. On a normative view, freedom is an intrinsic component of moral agency, by virtue of our status global citizens, and hence the embodied expressivity of social identity (Souffrant 2013). Postulating freedom as a vital pillar of belongingness is similarly motivated: being free correlates with personal empowerment, enabling an agent to enact a homelike existence and to self-actualize where the conditions are right for her personal flourishing.

Being free, in the "negative" sense, includes not being bogged down by life's problems, such that you are free (untrammelled) to devote attention to the things that matter to you. In other words, being free is to be unencumbered by life's vicissitudes and unconstrained by unfamiliar (perhaps even unpleasant) social norms. This is demonstrative of the "freedom *from*…" attributes I alluded to earlier: being liberated from constraints and restraints. Consider what it is like to live in a country governed by strict religious values, where certain dress codes are imposed on the population; for instance, the decree that all women must adhere to Islamic dress and headwear. As a Western female expat living under these conditions—say, in an Islamic country such as Saudi Arabia—this requirement may feel like an encroachment on her personal freedoms. As such, she may find herself struggling with finding a sense of belonging there. The lack of freedom she experiences has far-reaching implications for other aspects of belongingness; namely, safety, familiarity, acceptance, and trust. Lack of freedom in living conditions under the sociocultural norms and religious practices of a particular environment (regime of a country)—in this example, the Islamic world—determines far more than matters of a relatively mundane or even trivial nature (such as what you can/cannot do/say in public spaces); it may well *impinge* on who you are (your personal identity, your self-worth, your value as a human being, and so on) on a fundament level, dissolving the material quality of life you are permitted to enjoy. It stands to reason, therefore, that an environment in which you are unfree to truly be yourself can hardly be construed as belongingness-inducing in any salient way.

Being free in the "positive" sense, on the other hand, refers to an agent being free to be herself, such that she is able to think and act fluidly. Schmader and Sedikides refer to the ability to be oneself as "interpersonal fluency": "the ability to express oneself without needing to navigate others' expectations or social constraints" (Schmader and Sedikides 2018: 233). Freedom to be oneself is congruent with the ability to pursue one's life goals. Doing so makes an agent feel authentic, seeing as "the motivational effect of goal fit is to feel that one's actions are self-determined, which itself is a common component of feeling authentic" (Schmader and Sedikides 2018: 232). This feeling is known as state authenticity: the subjective sense of being true to oneself; being aligned with one's real self (Sedikides et al 2017). To be true to oneself—to feel truly

like one is being authentic—means “gaining access to one’s own self” (Altamirano 2021: 73) in ways that unlock your inner potential. An authentically led life can only be actualized with the right affordances, hence the importance in cultivating belongingness in all the right places where you feel/are free: free to *be* you (unwaveringly so) and free *from* regimes of regulation and restriction.

Note, however, that feeling free does not necessarily connote actually being free in real terms. Depending on where one lives, and the conditions governing the designated space (e.g., social mores of a particular nation), constraints present themselves in nuanced settings. As a resident in rural parts of the country, with limited access to a variety of goods and services otherwise available in urban areas, one may find certain aspects of life being restricted. A musician, for instance, has fewer options for performing live in her hometown, given the paucity of suitable venues and smaller crowds. Additionally, there is a palpable dearth of musical instrument stores; accessing new gear and spare parts can be a real hassle. Now, she is, of course, free to pursue her musical endeavors as a private citizen (there is no gun pointed at her head, demanding she cease playing music); however, the environment she is domiciled in may not be the most appropriate for facilitating her flourishing as a career musician. As Schmader and Sedikides suggest, it is up to an agent to self-select an ideal social setting where she can actuate her vocational attributes, in view of the fact that “[t]he motivation to validate socially central aspects of identity suggests that people could *choose* situations inhabited by similar others to activate and validate their default self” (Schmader and Sedikides 2018: 233; emphasis added). The authors further note that “when situations and environments are constructed or created with a certain kind of person as the default, the context itself is more likely to activate automatically this person’s most accessible and valued self-aspects in ways that are cognitively fluent and thus feel ‘true’” (Schmader and Sedikides 2018: 236). Belongingness in an environment where an agent is free to be her true self liberates her from the debilitating effects that accompany unhealthy forms of self-consciousness, thus endowing her with the advantaged status which Schmader and Sedikides refer to. The test for the veridicality of the affectivity of freedom—in other words, that one is *correct to feel that* one is free—lies in the ability to potentiate regular, salient, and authentic lived experiences as a private citizen in the public sphere.

Being deprived of any of the pillars of belongingness is distressing. However, what makes the lack of freedom particularly disconcerting is that it cuts right to the heart of what makes you who you are. Indeed, the idea of being free to be yourself concerns matters pertaining to personal agency, self-identity, and authenticity. An agent is likely to feel a greater sense of authenticity "when situations signal a fit to one's social identity" (Schmader and Sedikides 2018: 234). Being at home in her niche, an agent is free to engage with the world around her as she pleases. Thus, belongingness is realized—and recognized—in acts of participation. Usually, participation is accompanied with commitment: to play a part or role in activities that bring all participants together. In this manner, "the home is more than just an anchor for our memories and a sense of depth or subjectivity, but also serves as a pre-condition for a full participation in democratic political life" (Bormanis 2019: 22). Following from this, a claim could be made that there is experiential overlap between the feeling of acceptance and the feeling of freedom – both of which are afforded by membership to a particular social group. In other words, group membership confers benefits for individual members. This could take the form of pre-existing freedoms being enhanced/expanded through membership, or perhaps new freedoms being accessed/exercised because of it.

Where group-belongingness becomes politicized, the right/wrong kinds of membership(s) may have direct impact on the types of freedom she is likely to experience (or not). Take for instance the recent wave of migration from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom as of 2021.[23] Hong Kong nationals have experienced clampdowns on their civil liberties in ways they have never previously witnessed. Many agents (dissidents and ordinary folk alike) caught in this situation find the quagmire untenable and unacceptable: living in fear of persecution and being muzzled, for instance, is an unnatural and unfamiliar way to live. To be unfree is to be inauthentic. Realizing this has led to an exodus of Hong Kong nationals, the majority of whom have relocated to the UK, a land where they hope to experience greater acceptance, in the endeavor to re-establish a renewed sense of belonging: a new home free from politically motivated interference, where they can experience freedom once again.

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[23] URL = <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-55357495 - "The Hong Kong migrants fleeing to start new lives in the UK">

Comparing positive and negative renditions of freedom reveal that freedom is most salient when analyzing what is absent, lacking, or missing in a state of affairs where one's liberties have been curbed and curtailed. A case in point can once again be found in the situation facing Hong Kong nationals, who in recent years have suffered clampdowns on their right to free speech, free assembly and other civil liberties previously enjoyed. These restrictions undermine their sense of self (as freedom-loving individuals), giving rise to questions about their sense of belonging (i.e., whether it is possible to continue residing in Hong Kong, as an unfree citizen). Hong Kong nationals who have realized that acquiescing to an uninvited and unpredictable political environment—where civil liberties are flagrantly and frequently violated—is no longer a tenable and viable long-term option face the painful decision of uprooting themselves and migrating permanently to a foreign land, where belongingness needs to be rebuilt from scratch. This example of belongingness characterized by (up)rootedness is especially nuanced, best elucidated in the following passage:

> "To be rooted is to belong and to belong is to be a member of a community, a community with its own past, its own traditions, stories, smells, tastes, jokes, obligations, recipes, holidays, moral judgments, boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited, basic frames of meanings, fears and desires. That is to say – and it is increasingly necessary to say it in no uncertain terms – it is to be a member of a particular community, with a particular past, particular stories, smells, tastes and so on. It is not for an individual to merely pick and choose belonging. Belonging requires others and communities are not easily fungible." (Seligman 2021: 427)

Being rooted in this sense means that an agent is anchored and embedded in the environment within which she is domiciled, the corollary of which is an existential landscape tilled for the germination of life opportunities conducive for an unencumbered life. One's rootedness thus mediates one's freedom.

To elaborate, this means that in order for freedom to be exercised, one's existential landscape must necessarily be appropriately scaffolded as an effective affective backdrop affording a range of possibilities to create a homelike umwelt. In order not to feel out of place, certain things need to be put in place. This could mean having a niche scaffolded to afford an agent the means to freely actuate her goals. Within this niche, an agent's identity is embedded in what can be described as existential grounding, where an agent

recognizes she has a formal stake in her social environment: one that she calls home. In the pre-Covid era, Hong Kong nationals had no cause to question their rootedness (sense of belonging) in Hong Kong. However, the unforeseen change of circumstances resulting in the loss of freedom—a core aspect of the Hong Kong identity—meant that the previously inconceivable (i.e., the prospect of rebuilding one's life, in a foreign land, against one's wishes) had *transformed* into the presently necessary (the need to leave Hong Kong with a considerable degree of urgency). Threats to one's freedom give rise to consideration and implementation of courses of action that may well be life-altering (e.g., relocating to another country) but ultimately unavoidable, for the sake of re-establishing a new sense of belonging and recalibrating one's life trajectory.

The lesson in the case study of Hong Kong nationals and belongingness is twofold: firstly, that freedom is closely linked with identity (and relatedly, agency); and secondly, that there is much phenomenological overlap between feeling free and feeling safe. To be a free citizen in a democratic society means *feeling safe to express oneself freely*. It also means *feeling safe from harms/threats arising from the exercise of one's freedom*. The Hong Kong case is a prime example of negative freedoms being foregrounded in an agent's horizon of awareness. We find a similar rationale in the exhortation for "safe spaces" on university campuses: the idea that there ought to be designated environments where one can express one's thoughts, feelings, and ideas freely and openly, without fear of being shut down, denigrated, or assaulted.

In an environment where an agent's freedom of expression is stymied or undermined, she may experience this state of affairs as a disruption to her sense of identity and emotional stability. In other words, being deprived of free speech—and a safe space in which to express oneself freely—an agent is likely to experience being unsafe in terms of emotional vulnerability. In this manner, we observe how "emotion-security is better defined not by what it is, but by what it is not: it is simply the *absence of fear*" (Daemen 2022: 5; emphasis added). We can understand emotion-security to denote a state of affairs where one's emotions are well-regulated and kept in check. Understood differently, emotion-security could also mean being buffered against violent mood swings, impulsive actions, intrusive thoughts, and the like. Hence, being free can be framed as being unchained from self-inhibiting thoughts and behavioral patterns that

otherwise hold you back from becoming the most authentic and actualized version of yourself that you can conceivably be.

Freedom in the “negative” sense of the concept denotes being liberated from negative thoughts and emotions about external forces interfering with what you think, say, and do. To feel free also means to enjoy expressing yourself in the fullest capacity possible in what makes you who you are. Take for instance an up-and-coming comedian with a risqué sense of humor, looking to establish himself in the comedy circuit and for a receptive audience to whom he may showcase his politically incorrect stand-up material. It could be argued that the type of crowd that is attracted to a comedy show tends to have “thicker skin”, a higher tolerance of dark humor, and general openness to flowery language – and this is exactly the right kind of environment for those who enjoy uncensored comedy to belong to. Thus, personality fit is vital to maintain a cohesive internal culture and the perpetuation of social norms within the group setting.

Within the context of a comedy club and the comedy scene at large, there is an acceptance and understanding that creative expression ought to be celebrated and uncensored; and where offence is caused, it is generally accepted as unintended and non-malicious; and as a corollary, any misunderstandings can be worked through respectfully and empathetically. By and large, the mood at a comedy show is light-hearted and devoid of interpersonal conflict. There is an unwritten rule—a social norm—governing events of this nature, which is that jokes thrown around are to be taken in good humor (funny that), and not to be taken personally or out of context. Thus, the process of trust—harmonization with other group members—works bi-directionally: the individual selects the group as much as the group selects the individual. Moreover, as shown in the examples above with respect to the contrasting kinds of reception a comic experiences in different social settings, we can observe how individuals ascertain where there are likely to fit or belong, based on the presence or absence of good-naturedness in social interactions.

For a standup comic with a reputation for a rather politically incorrect brand of humor, he is likely to ascertain with fairly quick certainty which kinds of social events and environments he can trust to afford him a welcoming rather than a hostile reception. Being at home in her niche—such as a comedian in a comedy circuit where censorship is not practiced--an agent is free to engage

with this curated environment as she pleases, sans concerns about being cancelled. Thus, belongingness is realized—and recognized—in acts of free participation. Usually, participation is accompanied with commitment: to play a part or role in activities that bring all participants together, generating compounding willingness to engage further as the activities draw participants in, bonding them with one another. Thus, for those who similarly value free speech and freedom of expression—artists, musicians, novelists, bloggers, and others in the creative and media industries—a sense of belonging means aligning oneself with others who share your values and worldviews – in furtherance of your own life goals, and in pursuit of a eudaimonic existence.

This final core pillar of freedom, laying the foundations for belongingness to thrive, could well be the most important of them all. After all, aspects of freedom permeate into other domains (safety, trust, acceptance, and familiarity). To be safe includes freedom to express one's thoughts with like-minded others. To experience trust includes freedom to engage further. To feel accepted includes freedom to mingle with socioculturally-aligned others unimpeded. And to experience familiarity includes the ability to roam one's stomping ground freely and effortlessly without hesitation or aversion. Nevertheless, freedom is a stand-alone pillar, in its own right: freedom is valuable in and of itself – and freedom addresses a separate set of needs on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Whereas safety, trust, acceptance, and familiarity fall under "deficiency needs", freedom pertains more to "growth needs" (Maslow 1970) such as self-actualization (e.g., feeling accomplished, fulfilling one's dreams), aesthetic needs (e.g., rapture, bliss), cognitive needs (e.g., the pursuit of knowledge, achieving a new world record), and transcendence (e.g., spiritual connection, helping others attain their goals). Whereas the first four pillars help you *keep it together*, the pilar of freedom props up your *agential autonomy*, placing you in the driver's seat. It is inconceivable to envisage an agent belonging to any group or community that does not in some meaningful way afford her to be free and authentic. Moreover, freedom is often intrinsically linked with notions of happiness, peace of mind, and positive mental health and well-being – with the reverse being true (themes that pepper the chapters following on from this).

2.6 The (Additional) Pillar of Significance

In the previous section, I alluded to the pillar of freedom being the final one in the buttressing of belongingness. This is true indeed in most cases. Having said that, there are outlier cases where something else (i.e., additional) is needed to truly feel a sense of belonging. These cases have specific contexts or circumstances that call upon different thresholds to be implemented. To this end, I introduce the pillar of significance, whereby to feel significant is to feel like you matter and mean something to a cause or goal greater than yourself. For the sake of clarity, the pillar of significance is presented as an *additional* pillar to delineate special cases of belongingness (where significance *matters* greatly; see Chapter 4, for example, for a discussion on place-oriented forms of belongingness where this is certainly the case) from more generalized ones (where significance is a nice "bonus" of sorts but otherwise superfluous).

I begin the investigation into the concept of significance with a bold statement: *belongingness can be enhanced by feelings of significance and diminished by feelings of insignificance*. An effective buffer against feelings of insignificance can be found in the building of social capital. After all, social groups "seek to maintain a sense of cohesion and superiority by excluding those who don't 'fit'" (Roffey 2013: 41). For those deemed unfit (for membership) and hence rejected or excluded, there could be devastating social ramifications for them (Roffey 2013: 42). Where social capital is at stake, "individuals are likely to be more interested, more knowledgeable, and more concerned about their community" (Roffey 2013: 41), thus further reinforcing membership status and reminding members of the advantages of maintaining the group's ethos – in particular, *privileged access to coveted existential goods*.

Upon further examination, we see that there are several levels/rungs of belongingness within the group, in what Roffey refers to as "inclusive belonging" and "exclusive belonging" respectively, with the latter enjoying special benefits, rights, and opportunities pertaining only to those who meet certain membership criteria (Roffey 2013: 41-42). This is an interesting insight, with potentially far-reaching implications. You see, while they are called "exclusive" in the sense

that they are special and reserved for a select few, they are also “exclusive” in the sense that certain others (the vast majority, as a matter of fact) are *cut out* from (*denied* access to) the “really good shit” aisles of the existential goods department. In fact, what makes them so special, is precisely because they are so darn scarce. Thus, even when (you think that) you have made it (e.g., attained coveted status/access), you’re still not quite there yet, as it turns out (i.e., there are magnitudes of strata beyond your social standing, in the upper echelons of significance-land; you’re nothing special with your five pillars). That elusive, exclusive sixth pillar is what all the fuss is about, in certain circles. These are the circles you want to be in; everyone else does. Exclusivity in access to social capital[24] reminds those seeking group membership that belongingness is not pregiven; you have to work for it and *earn* it. In working for it, your membership has value, meaning, and *significance*.

In furtherance of the explication of the concept of significance, I return to Maslow’s model of the stratification of existential needs. Note that Maslow’s original hierarchy of needs had five stages (Maslow 1943), with the top tier (apex of the pyramid) later expanded to include not just self-actualization needs but also cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and transcendence needs (Maslow 1970). The pillar of significance encompasses these “higher” needs which Maslow calls “growth needs”: needs that must be met in order for an agent to feel fulfilled and experience a sense of accomplishment through realized potentiality (Maslow 1968). These are lofty goals indeed, goals which only higher-level forms of belongingness—practiced by communities, groups, and causes organized around and oriented toward significance-driven goals—may be able to accommodate, activate, and actualize.

Up to this point, this chapter has been devoted to the core pillars of belongingness (for which I have identified five) which describe most interpersonal activities and events in the social world. Salient forms of belongingness—whether predominantly rooted in sociality or solitude—demonstrate how complex and multifaceted the phenomenon is, covering several components: notably, the temporal, spatial, sociocultural, affective, and existential dimensions of belongingness. Lived experiences of safety, trust,

[24] Note, for example, how this compares to descriptions of the “fake” variant of “toxic belongingness” and its associated motivations analyzed in Chapter 4.

acceptance, familiarity, and freedom inform us of our place in the world. For most agents, to survive and exist comfortably would be a reasonable expectation to have, wherever we find ourselves domiciled. But for certain agents, simply existing would not suffice. To truly live means to thrive in a eudaimonic sense – to be(come) the best possible version of yourself. Thus, there are agents for whom belongingness matters in view of what their place in the world means for a fulfilling life suitably and maximally scaffolded based on considerations and calculations of a different order of existential priorities (for example, aligning oneself according to a higher calling or life purpose).

To grasp the salience of belongingness it all its complexity—ostensibly a big-picture look at the philosophical and phenomenological landscape mapped out to the fullest extent possible—it is necessary (not to mention beneficial) to traverse the upper rungs of belongingness, where a sense of belonging extends to higher-level considerations. By "higher-level", I refer to matters that can invariably and collectively be called metaphysical, transcendental, and even spiritual in nature – implicated once again in what Maslow (1970) refers to as growth needs. Growth needs that are personally meaningful—such as being in touch with a higher power, participating in a charitable cause, making cutting-edge music that is genre-defying—hold a special place in the minds and hearts of certain individuals. These growth needs sit atop the deficiency needs, meaning that having safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom in place may still be inadequate for belongingness to be fully realized.

For some agents, having full-fledged belongingness means the lofty growth needs must be satisfied – since these growth needs are of particular value, meaning, or significance, in ways that are personally and uniquely relevant and belongingness-enhancing *to them* (even if altogether bewildering and inscrutable to others). For Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living. Similarly, for some agents, *an unfulfilled/unactualized life is not worth living*. Thus, living a life less ordinary may mean seeking opportunities—either just for oneself, or alongside others, whatever the situation calls upon—to access higher-level dimensions of human experientiality in all its wondrous boundlessness. Hence, it may not suffice for some agents "merely" to, say, have a comfortable home, a decent job, a fun group of friends, and other such existential securities. Note that higher-level belongingness needs (such as self-

actualization and personal growth) are neither relevant nor mandatory in deciphering one's belongingness in all contexts. Nevertheless, the purpose of this section is to give a voice to, and shine a light on, lived experiences of agents for whom their story of belongingness is incomplete in the absence of existential projects and goals (individual and shared/collective) oriented/geared toward greater/deeper meaning/significance in life. Thus, the feeling of significance (and lived experiences thereof) matters in certain contexts of belongingness – and this section seeks to give these an appropriate voice.

Specifically, the feeling of significance captures lived experiences implicated beyond that which the scope of the five core pillars can cater for: experiences situated in the realms of the so-called "deep and meaningful stuff" that matters greatly for some (but not all) individuals. Significance implicates the relational salience (between self and others, and between self and environment) characteristic of special kinds of belongingness where the five core pillars are necessary *but not sufficient*. Furthermore, the feeling of significance elucidates some of the ineffable elements of belongingness that may elude description but are otherwise emoted through salient bonding experiences. Significance-laden collective experiences reveal how meaning is generated, transmitted, and shared in group settings; and additionally, how the diffusion and permeation of meaning through such instances of interpersonal engagement may be identified and recognized as personally significant for certain (but not necessarily other) individuals in the quest for belongingness.

If something that is significant to you can be narrativized, then what it means to you and how it makes you feel can be (at the very least, cognitively) accessed by others by way of narratives. When others are able to access that which is meaningful and significant to you, they can likewise personalize and personify this meaning and significance in ways that are uniquely relevant and authentic to them as well. Herein lies a sense of belonging characterized by a particular kind of salience which the five main pillars cannot satisfactorily elucidate (even when taken together). In short, this is a kind of *oneness*—a deep attunement and alignment with others—frequently featuring in cause-motivated and ideologically-driven communities and settings (e.g., spiritual movements, psychedelic networks, lobby groups, etc.). This feeling of *oneness with others* is the sort that, for some agents, can only be found and imbibed in

physical or social settings attuned to the higher dimensions of human experientiality (for example, a yoga instructor who feels a sense of oneness and belonging with other practitioners of spiritual arts at a festival or retreat centre). This sort of oneness is characterized by shared feelings and collective experiences, to greater degrees of magnitude in *meaningfulness* than your standard run-of-the-mill social interactions (such as, say, simply having a few pints at your local pub with your colleagues) – a kind of oneness that is often ineffable and confounding for the uninitiated.

Significance permeates shared experiences of certain communities in ways that are uniquely meaningful to the group and therefore often inscrutable to "those on the outside" so to speak. Drawing on Scheler's concept of "immediate feeling-with", Schmid opines that "there is a sense in which it is literally true that when a group of people has an emotion, there is one feeling episode, one phenomenal experience in which many agents participate" (Schmid 2014a: 8). Shared affectivity coupled with shared narrativity—feeling certain emotions together with others, then sharing what it is like to collectively experience these moments—unites group members over time and strengthens their sense of belonging to their community (Schmid 2014b). Interactions with fellow members of communities dedicated to the fulfilment of higher-order growth needs and suchlike contain phenomenologically rich content, analysis of which could prove immensely useful for researchers in the field (and indeed the public at large) in making sense of the metaphysical, spiritual, transcendent, transcendental, sublime, ethereal, ephemeral, effervescent, abstract, profound and inexplicable aspects of belongingness that are accessible, meaningful, and significant to certain individuals.

Aspects of belongingness that are not fungible—immutable characteristics of one's identity and personality—and therefore hold even greater significance for certain individuals and the communities to which they belong, provide insights into what it is like to experience significance. The phenomenality of significance is more saliently observable in ethnocultural contexts, where members of such communities experience a sense of fit, "groundedness", or being at home, through oral customs and traditions. One such common feature of these communities is the emphasis on both synchronic and diachronic aspects of the self being addressed through narratives that

provide structure, order, and explanation for what happens in one's life (Piredda 2020: 560). This can take the form of affective artifacts and other evocative objects that "have the function of reminding" oneself of one's sense of belonging and thus a "crucial element in how we 'manage' our affective world" (Piredda 2020: 561). Being reminded of the affective artifacts tethering ourselves to the world, we are thereby reminded of our place in it.

This point is well illustrated in the case of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, for whom their sense of belonging is intrinsically linked with their local communities and connection with their land, stemming from the concept of *kaitiakitanga*: a duty of guardianship over and reverence for the natural environment. In the indigenous Māori culture of New Zealand, *taonga* (cultural treasures) such as whale bone carvings and *pounamu* (greenstone) are treasured heirlooms passed down generation after generation to signify continuity of one's *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *iwi* (tribe). These heirlooms help Māori in managing emotions and supporting affective processes – and further symbolize their ties to their history and wider communities, past and present. As Piredda observes, affective artifacts "contribute to the creation of an external world that reflects our narratives, and hence our selves" (Piredda 2020: 562), affording possibilities for writing/reading ourselves into the world.

For Māori people, *korero* (heart-to-heart conversations) at their local *marae* (community meeting grounds) form an integral part of their way of life. Their narratives (oral traditions) are constitutive components of their sense of community, sense of home, and sense of belonging *over time*. Heirlooms bring extended relatives together for family or tribal gatherings, where further *korero* takes place and new memories are formed. These narratives or *korero* are significant for the preservation and continuity of customs, traditions, values, and a unifying sense of group identity. As a member of an *iwi*, one experiences a kind of exclusivity one gets from being accorded special status (akin to being a VIP member of a club, entitling one to special privileges); for example, having *kaumatua* (elders) assist you in your time of need (e.g., job references, character references, etc.). In Māoridom, one's identity is derived from one's ancestral lineage based on *iwi* membership, through which one enjoys a *tūrangawaewae* (place to stand) such as a *marae* – where one can be in touch with the *taonga*, *wairua* (non-physical spirit/essence) and *taniwha* (spirit beings

of lakes, rivers, forests, mountains, and other natural landscapes) that give one's umwelt meaning and significance.

Group membership based on shared cultural heritage, as is the case for members of New Zealand's Māori communities, accounts for a kind of belongingness that is buttressed by not just the five core pillars but also the additional pillar (of significance). For these types of agents, to belong is to be *aware that something, someone, or somewhere that matters to you (a) is accessible to you, (b) is attached to or associated with your sense of self/identity, and (c) adds value, meaning, and purpose to your life*. Members of such communities tend to cultivate loyalty and solidarity to a greater degree than many/most groups based on more trivial pursuits. Hence, the pillar of significance is *unlike the others*, in view of the fact that matters of significance tap into the cerebral and *spiritual* too – not just the visceral.

In other words, to speak about that which is valuable and meaningful to a person means tapping into the reflective and introspective modes of being, to have an appreciation of the sublime, as a means of explicating the inexplicable. For some, this means a longing for meaningful connections with others; for instance, a circle of friends with whom certain exclusive shared activities can be experienced and certain conversational subjects can be traversed that make sense to them (but not to others). For certain others, this could mean having a stake in something of value that transcends oneself; for instance, being part of an environmental movement. Having these associations and interactions allow you to *extend yourself into spaces which are extensions of who you are*.

The persistence of one's identity and way of life over time matter for maintenance of belongingness. Communities and groups based around certain larger-than-life goals develop solidarity through shared experiences and stories. In other words, members of such communities are linked through narrative sensibilities. For the perpetuation of one's identity—of which the sociocultural dimension is an indispensable component—there is a semblance of shared identity to be maintained, involving both self-identification with the group and the group's recognition as such; and "once we understand a person's identity as his or her individuality or unicity, it will no longer suffice to say that we are individuated only by our place in time and space, or by the external, social classification, but also by something additional" (Čapek & Loidolt 2021: 220).

Finding a way to "soldier on" with aplomb—to preserve and in fact extend oneself in perpetuity—requires "giv[ing] attentional priority to social cues", such that one "experience[s] social interactions as rewarding, and that they exhibit a preference for promoting actions that maintain and strengthen social relations and engagements" (Castro & Pacherie 2021: 7613). To this end, the power of storytelling plays a pivotal role – perhaps to a greater extent for certain kinds of belongingness. Stories of self-preservation can serve to inform an agent's assessment of belongingness. Lived experiences tells us something about whether we belong, and whether this belongingness can persist. Thus, in furtherance of this endeavor, "[l]ife stories help the individual to understand why the present self is who it is by providing critical background; additionally, stories impose plans and goals onto an otherwise unknowable future" (Baldwin & Keefer 2020: 3072). Narratives provide details about, and descriptions of, where one's identity best fits (i.e., can ideally be inserted and embedded) in pursuit and fulfilment of one's self-preservation and self-actualization.

Indeed, narrativity sets the tone of how one interprets the world: as welcoming, or otherwise. For example, if you have a more Hobbesian view of humanity, and consider the film "Lord of the Flies" to be a somewhat accurate depiction of how humans behave—the kinds of degenerates they devolve into becoming—when their survival is under threat, you are more likely to have a more cynical take on the social world. Indeed, depending on your worldview, certain aspects of the world take on greater significance for you; for instance, fear for one's personal safety in a city witnessing one crimewave after another. Thus, the stories we tell ourselves of our lived experiences help us form impressions of the trajectories our lives are taking. If an agent were asked whether she is "doing well in life", her response will likely consist of a mixture of objective and subjective standards of what *a good life* entails. What does it mean to live a *eudaimonic* life? Daemen offers us some guidance:

> "From the viewpoint of human flourishing, something can be good for someone for two different reasons: either it forms a component of a flourishing human life, or it is an instrument for leading such a life. In the first case, it has intrinsic value; in the second case, its value is instrumental." (Daemen 2022: 8)

In other words, eudaimonia (human flourishing) is both a means to an end *and* an end it itself. More often than not, the path to attainment of eudaimonia is made easier when paved—and accompanied—by others *whom you care about*.

To meet an agent's subjective criteria for self-actualization and self-fulfilment, certain objective standards of what it means to flourish must be attained. For instance, as a citizen of a nation, an agent derives certain socioeconomic benefits, for "a shared identity creates bonds of affection and solidarity that aid in the implementation of policies of distributive justice" (Costa 2018: 1394), benefits which in turn grant each agent access to life's needs. To conceptualize the good life is an inherently normative exercise. What does it mean *for me* to thrive? How best can I make this happen? Are there other kindred spirits out there? Which events should I participate in such that my life is more enriched and meaningful? To engage with such questions, and what they reveal about the persistence of belongingness over time, one must defer to the power of narratives.

Within these narratives lie evaluative commitments of "fundamental traits of human existence" such as "belongingness, participation, and 'historicity' (*Geschichtlichkeit*)" affording the pursuit of "goals and ideals that open up possibilities for realizing our most distinctive potential as human" (Altman 2016: 449). Emotional identification, through shared narratives, with like-minded others, matters greatly for interpersonal cooperation to flourish, common goals to be reached, and for necessary sacrifices to be made for the greater good (Costa 2018: 1394) – all of which help the community to prosper and grow. In certain respects, when the community prospers/grows, so too do its members – hence satisfying the growth needs of those for whom significance matters.

The meaning and value of belongingness holds specific (and additional) significance for agents committed to preserving and promulgating a particular way of life – and this significance becomes evident in life stories shared. From time to time, certain conditions and contexts create demand for membership of communities whose collective goal is the furtherance of mutual shared interests alongside the facilitation of individual needs being met. Thus, demand and desire for belongingness to groups that offer unique or exclusive benefits may be particularly appealing in tough times (e.g., existential crises, political unrest, financial uncertainty, and so forth), as well as to those seeking something more

in life (aka “a life less ordinary”); for example, a thrill-seeking or self-exploration driven lifestyle together with other expats. Living a purpose-driven life filled with meaningful pursuits alongside significant others may well be more attractive or urgent than ever, in view of a world encountered as increasingly standardized and unrelatable:

> “People lose sight of the value of spiritual pursuits such as the arts, philosophy and religion. Spiritual values are only noticed through their usefulness. When a culture becomes blind to the higher values, it also loses sight of its uniqueness as a culture and as a people. At the level of utility, people are more alike. Cultural differences matter very little when the goals become efficiency and productivity. It is the higher, spiritual values that reveal the uniqueness of a specific culture. The end of the modern worldview, Scheler maintains, is an internationalization of all cultures, a making of all peoples and cultures one and the same.” (Davis & Steinbock 2024)

As globalization marches on and modern societies become increasingly diverse and multicultural, some agents fear a monolithic monoculture is being imposed on us all: one that is nondescript, alienating, trivializing, mind-numbing, soul-crushing, and ultimately banal and dreary. To maintain a unique sense of self, then, one must necessarily resort to retreat into spaces where a shared sociocultural identity that is robust and resilient can thus persist over time (and indeed *coexist* with other identities without being *co-opted* or *colonized*).

Shared spaces affording lived and shared experiences within communities organized around so-called high-brow pursuits hold particular significance for those similarly “in the know” – a kind of knowing that is best understood through the lens of Scheler’s account of “spiritual perception”: co-experiencing through relating to one another in a fundamentally personalistic manner (Spencer 2022: 57). With spiritual perception, we have a theory for how emotions and values interrelate and correlate within the intersubjective milieux of cohesive communities, made up of what he refers to as “collective persons” (Scheler 1973). According to Scheler, collective persons are “endowed with conscience”, “given to themselves”, and “primarily organized around or oriented to the realization of some value family” – in full awareness of the fact that it is only through the community to which they belong, that they are able to self-actualize (Spencer 2022: 61). Together, we belong; and through this sense of belonging, we are endowed with the means to realize our dreams.

Belongingness, surveyed in various examples analyzed above, has proven to be rather precarious and unpredictable: one must be proactive to *attain, retain, and maintain one's place in the world*. As human beings, endowed with flesh and mind, "life becomes spiritualized and spirit becomes vitalized and embodied" in a dual process that leads to "the realization of the deeper, spiritual values, or it is a movement toward bestialization, a realization of the more shallow and superficial values" (Davis & Steinbock 2024). In other words, we have the capacity to reach for the sky or plunge to the depths. To this end, Scheler's analysis of spirit is, I would argue, most illuminating for the purposes of investigating the experiential depth and breadth of belongingness implicated in the pillar of significance in all its varied contextual applicability.

For Scheler, the (human) spirit is characterized by a kind of "world-openness" that is "captured by the Greek sense of wonder, a metaphysical wonder and astonishment that *there is something rather than nothing*" (Davis & Steinbock 2024; emphasis added). As spiritual beings (or at the very least, beings capable of cognizing, emoting, and appreciating the spiritual), we are "able to contemplate the meaning of being, time, death as well as the purpose of existence itself" – concepts which are "not merely theoretical concerns, but that which transcends, or is beyond, life" (ibid.). Accordingly, "[t]he radical openness that is spirit reveals … that the ground of all being is itself caught up in a process of becoming" (ibid.). Indeed, in the pursuit of greatness and achievement, we reach within to usher forth our very best.

Belonging to a cause or community driven by the pursuit of wonder, knowledge, discovery, and suchlike holds particular meaning, value, and significance for certain agents. Their lives, experiences, and stories are likely rich in experiential exploration, potentially revealing new contextual landscapes and experiential dimensions in our understanding of the phenomenon of belongingness. Whether material of spiritual, that which holds particular significance for certain agents may be described in Schelerian terms, where "value should not be reduced to need, pleasure, interest, utility, or, for that matter, duty" as it "begs the question of what makes something valuable in the first place" (Altamirano 2021: 26). In other words, that which is significant transcends the trivial, the mundane, the banal, and the superficial. Communities and collectives organized around the pursuit of particular lofty

goals and high-level pursuits hold particular meaning and significance for certain agents, and as such are worthy of loyal and devoted membership.

Given foregoing considerations, we can surmise that the significance of belongingness to *identity-conscious* agents is predicated on access to the concurrent fulfilment of needs spanning a broad range of existential considerations, from the mundane and ordinary to the spiritual and transcendent. When values, interests, and desires shared by a group align with shared aims and goals, shared attitudes are created – attitudes which help strengthen mutual bonds, enhance the stability of interpersonal connections, and engender greater collaboration and mutual trust (Huebner & Hedahl 2018: 106-107). Shared attitudes implicate a *meeting of minds* on a much deeper level. Strong social connectedness, the product of a socially cohesive collective, acts as a cornerstone of resilience as well as a protective buffer for one's psychological well-being (Haslam & Haslam 2019: 23). Social cohesion of this kind "can be observed and measured in different ways, through trust, cooperation, norms of reciprocity, civic engagement and openness to giving and receiving support" (Ibid.). Furthermore, social cohesion manifests as community spirit *in action* – through culturally meaningful interactions, unique shared experiences, and reasonable access to life opportunities (McManus et al 2012: 22, 27). For those whose sense of belonging is both identity-based and community-oriented, it stands to reason that having access to socially cohesive interactions is a boon for one's self esteem and reinforcement of feelings of significance: that you *do* matter, in view of *your standing in the eyes of others*.

Much has been said in this section above feelings/experiences of significance and their place in the taxonomy of belongingness – the main points of which may be summarized in the following observations. Firstly, the notion of significance bridges the temporal, spatial, identitarian, narrative, and various other dimensions of belongingness. The takeaway here is that belongingness can oftentimes operate as a compass, on the one hand, guiding an agent toward (more) homelike places, and a needle, on the other hand, weaving together various dimensional threads in the tapestry of belongingness.

Secondly, experiences of significance traverse experiential landscapes beyond the scope of the five core pillars, either severally or collectively. This experientiality often pertains to higher-level considerations commonly described

as metaphysical, transcendental, or spiritual in nature, further characterized by the ineffability and inscrutability of certain experiences (notably, those as expressed in “trip reports” of the entheogenic kind, a topic of discussion in Chapter 5 in relation to psychedelic-based therapeutic interventions for better mental health outcomes) from which new revelations may spring forth.

Thirdly, subjectivity pertaining to the affectivity and experientiality of significance is accessible through narratives of significance and meaning, opening new avenues for research in the domain of autopoietic/enactivist conceptions of belongingness within a 4E Cognition framework of analysis. This is flagged here as a possible future direction for scholarship in *the will to belong as a form of conatus* – in other words, the instinctual and primal drive to maintain and enhance oneself over time being *mediated by belongingness*.

Fourthly, the concept of significance sheds new light on the tendency to defer to innate primal and tribalistic behaviors, especially where belongingness is fostered by a desire to be safe and free from fear (see, for instance, Chapter 4 for an analysis of displacement as motivation for certain in-versus-out-group thought patterns and behavioral dynamics). Put differently, there are instances where the desire to attain, retain, and maintain a grip on significance may motivate certain toxic behaviors (another topic analyzed in Chapter 4).

Fifthly, the concept of significance, whilst not conceptualized here as a core pillar of belongingness, is nonetheless a useful lens through which the phenomenon of belongingness in all its complexities, nuances, and dimensionalities is thoroughly analyzed. After all, examples abound of various kinds of belongingness where the pillar of significance is necessary to *stabilize* and *reinforce* the other five pillars – particularly in cases where the foundational groundwork of the pillars of belongingness is already pre-scaffolded and preordained in certain immutable sociocultural contexts (e.g., indigenous forms of belongingness embodied and embedded in specific places and locations).

Sixthly and finally, significance may be visualized as either a “cherry on top” or a “gateway drug (to deeper/higher belongingness)” in certain cases. The former perspective frames significance as a bonus add-on window into what makes belongingness salient in some contexts rather than others. The latter perspective frames significance as *the* preeminent *portal* leading to other

chambers in the *museum of belongingness* – affording new possibilities for agents in attaining forms of belonging of greater immensity and significance, accessible only by scaling new heights, one rung at a time, utilizing ladders previously privileged to some agents and not others (but henceforth available, with the right keys, to others too, such as your good self, likewise on quests to belong). Both perspectives lend weight to the assertion that significance indeed has a place on the map charting the entire landscape of belongingness.

In conclusion, significance is an important tool in the overall toolkit for excavating the buried treasures[25] of the world of belongingness. Significance may not be necessary for some (perhaps even most) kinds of group-belongingness – but for certain kinds of group-belongingness, significance means the world to members of these communities. Thus, it would be remiss of any serious scholar in the phenomenology of belongingness to deny these agents a voice and platform for their lived experiences to be acknowledged.

Now that we have a comprehensive framework accounting for the roots of belongingness, the moment has arrived for us to test this framework in a variety of different scenarios – to scrutinize where, how, and why belongingness holds up (or crumbles) when its pillars are rattled by the vicissitudes of life.

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[25] Note how mining in an excavatory sense means "digging for something". Mining, I propose, can also mean "the process of making something mine" – like meaning (this usage of the term, I believe, is novel). Taken together and applied to a phenomenological framework of analysis of meaning (with respect to belongingness, and other phenomena for which space does not permit further analysis here), mining may thus be described as *the process of extracting, excavating, and extricating meaning (and meaningfulness) from the world and making it subjectively meaningful*. In this manner, *I mine what is mine to mine and make it mine*. The concept of "mining" (excavating) is, I believe, a useful tool, visual aid, and relatable motif (not to mention wonderful pun!) in describing how one seeks – and discovers – meaning in the world, much like how a treasure-hunter would conduct one's business. Existentially meaningful treasures lie waiting to be mined/excavated, and to be made your own. Within the context of belongingness, the exercise of mining meaning may be especially relevant to certain communities whose members seek greater meaning, purpose, and significance in their lives for growth needs to be met and eudaimonic endeavors to be actualized.

Chapter 3:

Belongingness Put to the Test

Belongingness is a complex and nuanced phenomenon – this much we have established by now. To belong means different things to different individuals. Nevertheless, there are common threads that run through cases of belongingness across different contexts. To grasp the essence of what belongingness feels like, we must identify its core, foundational characteristics – which I refer to as the *pillars of belongingness*: safety, familiarity, acceptance, freedom, and trust (with significance as an additional pillar, one that sits atop the rest in certain cases). These pillars constitute the essential ingredients of what it is like to experience belongingness: they describe how an agent's life is structured and scaffolded in relation to the social world. Furthermore, these pillars provide a framework within which the structure of an agent's experience of physical/social environments as belonging or otherwise may be investigated.

Theory must always be backed by practice. Thus, we must put the theory of belongingness as outlined thus far to the test, by applying the pillars in the analyses of a variety of cases where an agent's connection to the social world is undergoing change or is under threat. To be precise, this is a test of whether the framework of "core pillars of belongingness", as set out in the previous chapter, can account for a variety of experiences of homelikeness and unhomelikeness across various sociocultural contexts. This framework ought to be robust yet flexible enough to implicate cases ranging from the ordinary, familiar, and trivial to the ineffable, obscure, and profound. Additionally, this framework ought to be relatable enough for the average person to apply in their own everyday lives, to make sense of considerations such as "is this where I fit best?", "why am I not vibing with this scene?", "what can I do to feel more at home here?", and so forth. With this in mind, let us put belongingness to the test now in the following ways.

In section 3.1, I explore a variety of lived experiences of being-by-yourself in its positive, neutral, and negative forms through an analysis of solitude, aloneness, and loneliness respectively. Utilizing a "lack/loss" versus "absence" distinction (which I further employ to distinguish unbelongingness from nonbelongingness in Chapter 4), loneliness (a *lack/loss* of sociality – *negatively* valenced) is differentiated from aloneness (a mere *absence* of sociality – *neutrally* valenced), with both further contrasted with solitude (a *superfluousness* of sociality – *positively* valenced). To investigate varieties of belongingness and unbelongingness, it is imperative we survey the full landscape of social and nonsocial experiences and the kinds of feelings and moods they generate. Mapping out these parameters will help us access and assess what it means to feel at home or feel out of place. Being on our own affords us space and time to reflect on the thought that "[t]o be with others, we must also be able to be without them" (Gheaus 2022: 249). As we entertain this thought and what it means for us on an individual level (a personal/subjective basis), it will become clearer how it is possible to belong without others in certain respects; and in a similar fashion, how it is possible that being in the company of certain others can make you feel a *sense of unbelonging* (with the latter point further explored as a kind of "forced belongingness" in Chapter 4).

In section 3.2, I present the recent phenomenon of the global COVID-19 pandemic as an ideal case study in loneliness, characterized by lack and/or loss of belongingness in the form of missing pillars. No other global event in recent living history has impacted the human population with quite such immensity and ferocity as the pandemic has. We were all thrown off-guard and taken by surprise by—i.e., *unprepared* for—the rapidity of viral spread and the enforcement of measures that followed: the reorganization and restructuring of our public spaces in ways that became unrecognizable and unrelatable, accompanied by new rules of social engagement that we regularly encountered as evoking some combination of sterility, hostility, and puerility. Indeed, many agents have not responded well to abrupt existential changes in their lives, being adversely impacted financially, socially, psychologically, and other ways. To this end, this section examines the unexpectedness and uncanniness of being untethered from a taken-for-granted normality that forms the basis of our

everyday reality, and the potential ramifications for individual and collective enterprises of being-in-the-world.

In section 3.3, the phenomenon of loneliness is further examined within the sociocultural contexts of China, Japan, and South Korea, through the culturally bound phenomena of *shamate*, *hikikomori*, and *honjok* respectively, whereby unique variants of loneliness in these respective local populations have been observed and reported. These cases provide useful insights into nuanced responses to experiencing the world as uncanny and unhomelike, from non-Western contexts. Although loneliness is part of the human condition and a ubiquitous phenomenon, adaptive responses often differ. These unique responses are testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, revealing lessons applicable to other sociocultural contexts where similar existential threats may emerge.

In section 3.4, I analyze the online world (and the various modes of virtual connectivity it offers) as a surrogate for the offline world. For those who experience a lack or loss of sociality and struggle to connect with others through offline means, the online world affords a kind of virtual belongingness where meaningful and beneficial interactions can take place. Thus, the online world affords new and exciting opportunities for the lonely, isolated, alienated, socially anxious, and depressed to maintain their grip on sociality. Virtual tools allow agents to reimagine, rebuild, and reinforce their pillars of belongingness in ways that would otherwise be *out of reach* to them by relying exclusively on the offline world and offline affordances. Moreover, virtual environments create new possibilities for agents afflicted by poor mental health to seek therapeutic relief.

Utilizing this theoretical framework capturing the positive, neutral, and negative emotions and moods associated with experiences of being-by-yourself, through an analysis of solitude, aloneness, and loneliness respectively, we gain a better understanding of how a variety of experiences of unbelongingness give rise to unique adaptive responses to the vicissitudes of life that Hobbes famously and devastatingly characterized as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1968/1651: 186). Furthermore, by assessing experiences of belongingness and unbelongingness in the world in its various guises, we are equipped with the right tools to investigate our lived experiences, make sense of them, and henceforth find our (rightful?) place in the world.

3.1 Varieties of Being-by-Yourself: A Journey through Experiences of Solitude, Aloneness, and Loneliness

The purpose of this section is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of being-by-yourself, across the spectrum of affectivity, from the negative (loneliness) through the neutral (aloneness) to the positive (solitude). In doing so, we obtain an understanding of what experiences of being-by-yourself reveal about the need and/or desire to belong. To reiterate, "negative" here means being-by-yourself having a harmful impact on your feelings, emotions, moods, and outlook in life, "positive" here means being-by-yourself has a beneficial impact instead, and "neutral" here means being-by-yourself having neither a harmful nor beneficial impact. Furthermore, the analysis of being-by-yourself—alternatively, *not-being-with-others*—reveals that the state of nonsociality can be understood in terms of "lack", "loss", and "absence" of sociality – with each variant telling us something different and unique about a nonsocial agent's orientation toward (mode of encountering) the social world.

Experiences of absence, lack, and loss occupy different affective territorial pockets along a gradient (or sliding scale) of intensity. Note, for instance, how there is a material difference between saying "I lack siblings" and "I have lost my siblings". Being an only child (as I am), having never grown up with any siblings (though as a kid, there were times I wished I had them), is a rather different lived experience from having grown up with siblings and then tragically losing them at some point in time. The person who wishes she had siblings (hence lacks them) and the person who has no siblings anymore (i.e., lost them, in tragic circumstances) both inhabit the world as an only child; however, the person who experiences loss can be said to experience a greater depth of feeling. Lacking siblings, I thereby also lack *phenomenal access* to *what it is like to lose* them. Thus, loss is more negatively valenced than lack.

In comparison, the affectivity of absence occupies a more neutral range of emotions (e.g., calmness, ambivalence, indifference, boredom, etc.; a kind of

"meh"-ness, if you will) – with the affectivity of lack catering for somewhat negative emotions (e.g., sadness, longing, worry, etc.), and the affectivity of loss catering for strongly negative emotions (e.g., grief, despair, sorrow, etc.). Comparing an only child who wishes she had siblings to an only child who does not care about the fact that she has no siblings, we can say that the latter constitutes more of a neutral case. It is important to distinguish these dispositional states for two reasons: (a) fleshing out the nuances in neutrally-valenced experiences (noting how they differ from positively-valenced and neutrally-valenced experiences, and (b) highlighting the conceptual parallels between the positive, neutral, and negative states of nonsociality (being solitude, aloneness, and loneliness respectively) and the positive, neutral, and negative states of sociality (being belongingness, nonbelongingness, and unbelongingness respectively). This latter point will be examined further in Chapter 4 with respect to selected case studies in which belongingness is observed having unravelled, broken down, or gone awry.

In order to distinguish "lack", "loss", and "absence" from one another, let us consider experiences of being-by-yourself across varying contexts. Suppose there are four digital nomads based in Costa Rica. Each person does not have an observable or identifiable social life. Expat A used to have a group of friends (fellow digital nomads) with whom she fraternized; however, they have all since moved on and returned to their respective countries of origin. She misses her friends dearly (whom she has lost in the sense that they are elsewhere, out of her reach), and life hasn't quite been the same since they all departed.

In the case of Expat B, he happens to be socially awkward, having struggled much of his life to make friends; his experiences in Costa Rica have been much the same (as Expat A's) in this regard: lacking friends, though not having lost them (given his already depleted social circle to begin with). On the odd occasion when he plucks up the courage to be sociable (e.g., heading to the local pub one Friday evening to make small talk with strangers, hoping this will eventually lead to more interesting and meaningful conversations), this usually ends up being a fruitless and frustrating affair; and over time, he likely feels less inclined to try and be sociable again.

As for Expat C, who is a generally affable character with no trouble making friends (and often does wherever he goes), he nonetheless chooses to

mostly keep to himself (avoid social events) as he needs to complete his project at hand. He enjoys time alone anyway, as it allows him to pursue self-directed creative endeavors (e.g., painting, writing poetry, making music, etc.) that take his mind off his work. He has little time for friends, and that is just fine for him. Expat A can be described as lonely, on account of *loss* of friends (and this having a negative impact on her). Expat B can be described as lonely, on account of *lack* of friends (and this having a negative impact on him too). Expat C can be described as alone, on account of *absence* of friends (and this having a neutral impact on him). Thus, not all agents by themselves (on their own) can (or should) be described as—and assumed to be—lonely. Whether a person is lonely is determined by contextual circumstances, the extent to which some aspects of her life are diminished, and how one feels about this state of affairs.

We now arrive at a variant of being-by-yourself where the absence of a social life is very much appreciated and embraced. This is the situation for Expat D, a fourth digital nomad based in Costa Rica too.[26] Unlike the other three, Expat D moved to Costa Rica with the sole intention of starting a new life and "getting away from it all" so to speak. She has no friends or relatives in Costa Rica, and that is the whole point of moving there. She is burnt out from work (hence her quitting and moving overseas), newly divorced, still recovering from a recent operation, and is rather keen on a quiet life in a tropical climate. Besides, she has just taken up photography as a hobby, and relishes the time she spends in the wilderness capturing moments of the wondrous wilderness. Being on her own gives her time to heal, pursue new endeavors (professional and personal), and be closer to nature. She has no need for new friends, or desire to be part of any community. She is content in a personal space that is curated just for her. A social life is *superfluous* to her. Time otherwise spent with others, can now be spent exclusively with herself.

With regard to Expat D, we can forward the claim that she suffers no discernible lack or loss from an absence of community links or indeed any social life per se. Her solitude can thus be described as "a positive or painless emotional attitude towards being apart from others", a state of affairs "lacking the relevant pro-attitudes towards social participation, whether temporarily or as

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[26] Costa Rica has become a hotspot for digital nomads in recent years (and FOMO, it would appear, is real): URL = <https://nomadific.com/costa-rica-guide-for-digital-nomads/>

an enduring trait of character" (Roberts & Krueger 2021: 198), since she is perfectly content living a quiet life all by herself. She enjoys her solitude and does not fear being lonely. Hence, it can be said that Expat D *belongs to a community of one*. And that will do just fine for her. Expat D thus presents us with an interesting case of an agent who, despite lacking prosocial attitudes as outlined by Roberts and Krueger (2021), nonetheless has other means of access to the existential goods necessary for her upkeep (and perhaps even self-actualization, where practicable).

The parable of the four digital nomads reveals that the lived experiences of loneliness, aloneness, and solitude each contains unique phenomenal attributes and characteristics. Accordingly, this section aims to explicate the variety of experiences of being-by-yourself across negative, positive, and neutral affective states – implicated in loneliness (see section 3.1), solitude (see section 3.2), and aloneness (see section 3.3) respectively. This tripartite categorization adds new layers of nuance captured in affectively neutral ways of experiencing the world without others, helping to shed new light on the grey areas of the experientiality of being-by-yourself that are neither overtly/obviously positive nor negative. Traversing the spectrum of affectivity in experiencing the world without others, across the spectrum of valence, provides us with further insights on how the five core pillars of belongingness stand the test of time as they are battered on various fronts by the forces of society and nature.

3.1.1 On Loneliness

We begin our analysis of the experientiality of being-by-yourself with an examination of the phenomenon of loneliness, which is most commonly associated with the status of being on your own (*and* experiences thereof being rather unpleasant and undesirable). There is indeed something it is like to be or feel lonely. Being lonely makes you feel certain things (e.g., vulnerability), in certain ways (e.g., anxiety). Being lonely could also mean there is a lack, loss, or absence of certain feelings (e.g., not feeling safe and/or free). To this end, when thinking of loneliness, it is natural that notions of estrangement and antisociality spring to mind. In other words, we tend to associate loneliness with disconnection from social life: a state of affairs denoting *(de)privation* of

existential comforts. The nature of this disconnection, of course, varies from one person/situation/context to another. Nevertheless, we can make three broad generalizations about the lonely person: that her being lonely is involuntary (i.e., it was unintended; she found herself in this situation in a manner that was largely beyond her control), unpleasant (e.g., being in a poor mental state as a result of prolonged loneliness), and undesirable (i.e., she would rather not be lonely; would choose sociality if such an opportunity presented itself to her). To be lonely, therefore, is to experience a lack or loss of existential needs (they remain out of reach) that would otherwise be available and accessible in a state of belongingness.

Loneliness is a common yet troubling phenomenon. Studies on the phenomenon of loneliness (see, for example, Svendsen 2017) show that there has been an increase in self-reported experiences of loneliness, especially in this modern era marked by increased social disconnection. Despite a variety of technological tools, devices, and gadgets at our disposal, with which connecting with others is a mere button-push away, we seem to be lonelier than ever before. An argument can be mounted that loneliness has exacerbated, owing to recent global events. There is perhaps no better case study than the recent COVID-19 pandemic (see section 3.2 for analysis of this event at its impact) with respect to social disconnection – an event which continues to leave an indelible mark on us, individually and collectively, in a number of ways that give us cause for concern. In this so-called "New Normal" era we currently find ourselves in, research increasingly reveals the emergence of a "loneliness epidemic" sweeping the globe: a common theme being the prevalence of loss or lack of sociality and connectivity with others worldwide. To grasp the nuances of the phenomenon of being on your own, a range of terminology is used to make sense of subjective experiences thereof – some of which obfuscates through ambiguity. This section thus aims to provide conceptual clarity.

Before exploring the depth and breadth of the phenomenon of loneliness, we must first address the question "what is it like to be (or feel) lonely?" Svendsen offers the following analysis of being lonely and feeling lonely:

> "In order to be lonely, you have to feel lonely. To be lonely is to have a definite emotion. That emotion is a kind of sadness. I can *think* I am lonely without actually being in that state, but I cannot *feel* lonely without actually being lonely. The extent to which *x* is

> lonely is completely determined by the affective state in which *x* exists, and that is essentially independent of all objective determinants, such as whether *x* is socially isolated or not, whether *x* has close confidants, friends, family, and so on." (Svendsen 2017: 39-40; original emphasis)

Svendsen makes a distinction between loneliness-as-feelings and loneliness-as-status, postulating that the former cannot exist without—and thus predicates on—the latter. The status of being lonely is what gives rise to feelings of loneliness. Therefore, if one is feeling lonely, it means that she *is* lonely. Put differently, it means that feelings of loneliness implicate and predict a lonely disposition. Based on the foregoing conceptualizations, we can surmise that to *feel* lonely is to *be* lonely. But can (and should) we also deduce that to *be* lonely is to *feel* lonely? Svendsen does not elaborate on this (beyond the assertion above), so we will have to make further extrapolations.

Loneliness tells us something about the relationship between the lonely agent and the world around her. In particular, her being lonely reveals certain characteristics about world events. For Arendt, loneliness is "closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness", an observation further qualified here:

> "To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness can be the preliminary condition for superfluousness, just as isolation can (but must not) be the preliminary condition for loneliness." (Arendt 1962: 475)

Indeed, agents whose lives have been upturned, who no longer feel grounded, whose lives lack meaning and purpose, and who may be grieving the loss of social connections, likely feel abandoned, alienated, and cast out of the social world. Take for instance an employee who has been furloughed during the pandemic, facing financial uncertainty and existential insecurity, who lives alone and lacks adequate support networks. One can imagine her experience being characterized by unease and distress. *There is something it is like to experience loneliness, and this experience is characterized by lack or loss.*

What is lacking or lost in the case of loneliness? According to Roberts and Krueger (2021), a lonely individual is one who is cognizant that certain social goods are missing (Roberts & Krueger 2021: 186). The emotions (of loneliness) she experiences are responses to "emotional absences" in her life (ibid.). Indeed, loneliness reveals what is *missing* in one's life (and this is how

Roberts and Krueger define "absence"; I offer a slightly different definition below), but it also confirms what is *present*. And what is present is a deep gaping void that needs to be filled. How an agent feels about her state of being-by-herself is contingent on the desirability of what Roberts and Krueger refer to as *richer* social goods, some of which may be out of reach, for her flourishing (Roberts & Krueger 2021: 191). Returning now to our parable of the four digital nomads, to test this theory, we can make the following assessment regarding their respective social standings:

- Expat A, in having experienced *loss* of friends, demonstrates she is lonely through her yearning for friends, along with the likelihood she is also *grieving* the social life she one had but has since lost.
- Expat B, who *lacks* companionship, very much *craves* it, and struggles to make new friends in a new environment, likewise exhibits loneliness.
- Expat C, *ambivalent* toward sociality (despite having friends), demonstrates he is alone *but not lonely*. *Absence* of sociality does not seem to bother him or impinge on his enjoyment of life. His status of being alone, in this case, is likely self-imposed; as in, he freely chooses to *keep to himself*. Note that this agent is *non*social but not *un*social (or *anti*social, for that matter) and is therefore alone but not lonely.
- Expat D, despite being by herself, is not only *unbothered* by the *absence* of friends or an active social life but *relishes* the time she has available to her to focus on her recovery, well-being, and life goals. In other words, she *benefits* from a *solitary* (rather than socially oriented) way of life.

Based on these conceptual distinctions, we can deduce that loneliness, characterized by affective loss and lack (as per the lived experiences of Expats A and B respectively), is often defined by the unattainability of richer social goods such as companionship, affection, moral support, "hangout mates", and so forth. Contrast these with the lived experiences of aloneness (in Expat C's case) and solitude (in Expat D's) in which all the social goods needed/desired are already present (in both Expats C's and D's respective cases). Hence, in certain cases, attainment of the needed/desired social goods is possible *sans* the social elements (in Expat D's case specifically). The takeaway from this analysis is as follows: the more *adversely affected* an agent is by the lack and/or loss of access to social goods, the more likely she is to seek a sense of

group-belongingness to improve her chances of attaining the social goods she so needs/desires, and thus *restore* or *replace* a social life that has slipped (or been wrenched away) from her.

Lonely individuals, such as Expats A and B, deal with their respective lonely dispositions in a variety of ways. Loneliness is a call to action, eliciting responses varying in degree of effectiveness. Some lonely individuals reach out, trying their level best to rectify the situation; for example, by finding a new set of friends. Others reach within to find their inner strength. Yet others withdraw into a state of seclusion (see section 3.3 for a case study on social isolation). Whatever the case may be, when sociality is missing in someone's life, one is prompted to take some kind of action[27] – to avert an unpleasant state of affairs, to fill some kind of void in one's life, and so forth. In examining what is missing in one's life, we see there are two kinds of void that matter for the lonely and unbelonging: that which is not there whence it once was (i.e., loss of something), and that which has never been there (i.e., lacking in something).

Consider what it is like for someone to be lonely because she has lost her group of friends (e.g., through permanent relocation) and is still grieving this loss (as per Expat A's lived experiences) vis-à-vis what it is like for someone to be lonely because he struggles to make friends (as per Expat B's lived experiences). Both individuals experience loneliness on account of lacking friends in their lives, hence missing certain vital needed/desired social goods. Where these experiences differ is in *emotional content*: the experience of the former is characterized more by *grief*, whereas the experience of the latter is characterized more by *longing*. Accordingly, lack and loss speak to missing social goods experienced differently – with lack implicating *privation* of essential social goods, and loss implicating *deprivation* of essential social goods.[28] This leaves phenomenological room for certain kinds of absence of social goods, characterized neither by lack nor loss, to implicate *non-lonely* moods and emotions (I examine this phenomenon of aloneness in subsection 3.1.3),

[27] It follows that even what may seem like inaction—for example, locking oneself away in one's room for days on end at times—is still a form of action: choices have been made, intention has been set, and (physical/mental) activity is still happening in one's private sphere.

[28] A further conceptual nuance distinguishing loss from lack is explored in section 4.1 (delineating unbelongingness from nonbelongingness), where I explicate why all forms of loss necessarily implicate lack, but why not all forms of lack reflect loss.

exemplified in Expat C's life circumstances. As for Expat D, she is the outlier of the group – having her *own means* of attaining her required existential goods.

To scrutinize the claim that the phenomenon of being-by-yourself exists across varying contexts in positively, neutrally, and negatively valenced states—that is, solitude, aloneness, and loneliness respectively—let us delve into the temporality of each experience methodically, extrapolating why these distinctions matter for determining the kinds of belongingness (and loss/lack/absence thereof) we are dealing with. The duration of experiences of being-by-yourself matter for whether an agent's lived experiences may be described as implicating solitude, aloneness, or loneliness. For an agent experiencing solitude, we could say that she experiences time as passing faster, whereas for an agent experiencing loneliness, the opposite is true: time is experienced as passing more slowly. Research suggests that when you are having fun and engaging in pleasurable activities, it seems as though time goes by more quickly; before you know it, the activity has come to an end (Rudd & Perez-Munoz 2021; Gable & Poole 2012; Rudd et al 2012; Failing & Theeuwes 2016). Perhaps you may wish that the activity or experience would carry on indefinitely. Think of the times you have been on an enjoyable holiday: before too long, you are already packing your bags, ready to return to your "normal life". The experience of solitude is very much akin to this at the best of times.

Conversely, if the experience, activity, or event is unpleasant or undesirable, you simply cannot wait for it to conclude; and while it is unfolding, it can feel like it is dragging on forever. Cast your mind back to what it was like when you were trapped in your own home during government mandated lockdowns. With a lack of stimulation, and beset with feelings of boredom, it may have felt as though there was no end to the misery, particularly when "time seems to pass very slowly because one's attention is focused on the present moment without any pleasant distraction" (Witowska et al 2020: 2). Now imagine you are on a rather awkward date, where there is no chemistry; the conversations do not flow smoothly, and you are scrambling for things to talk about while you push scraps of food around your dinner plate and avoid eye contact. You cannot wait for this ordeal to be over; your patience has run out; and perhaps every passing minute feels like an hour. In other words, your experience of time is distorted, which can feel disorientating and disturbing.

The experience of loneliness is very much akin to this. Whether you are trapped indoors (e.g., during lockdowns) or stuck at a painstaking date, you are suffering to some extent because you have a craving or longing (e.g., for moral support, for a companion who gets you, etc.) that is unmet and unsatisfied. Loneliness, marked by prolonged episodes of craving and longing, is therefore a distinct kind of existential absence where the lack or loss of social goods is at the forefront of your awareness: privation and deprivation that can feel like the passage of time in a prison cell where every day feels more or less the same and nothing is realistically going to change (improve) anytime soon.

Contrast this with the experience of aloneness, where the experience of the flow of time likely has less bearing on one's affective states; in other words, flow of time is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Time, experienced through alone (rather than solitary or lonely) experiences, feels like it is passing neither quickly (or more quickly than desired) nor slowly (or more slowly than desired); it simply passes – period. No normative value is ascribed to the passage of time in aloneness, and perhaps you are altogether oblivious to how time is flowing anyway. You are simply going about your daily routines without pause for thought. In this neutral state, there is no yearning or concern. Accordingly, we can use aloneness as a *baseline* (a control in an experiment) for measuring the experiences of temporality in contexts of either more positively-valenced or more negatively-valenced forms of being-by-yourself. And by doing so, the link between temporality and affectivity becomes ever more apparent.

We can further understand the link between temporality and affectivity with regards to experiences of being-on-your-own through descriptive language in self-reports. Experiences of temporality along the spectrum of experiences of being-by-yourself—from loneliness (at one end), through aloneness (in the middle), to solitude (at the other end)—can be ascribed normative value based on the choice of language we use to describe these varied experiences. We can turn to the study conducted by Hipson et al (2021) on the phenomenon of being-on-your-own through the choices of language usage in social media communication, which is groundbreaking in a number of ways. For one, analyzing natural language use via the social media platform Twitter/X—widely considered to be the predominant "digital town square"—provides valuable

insights into how ordinary folk think and feel, and therefore can be regarded as representative of everyday lived experiences.

With respect to the choice of words used in tweets (messages posted via Twitter/X)—of which over 19 million were analyzed—in reflecting users' emotional states, the authors cite the affective dimension of dominance, which "may provide some insight into motivations as it reflects the extent to which one feels in control versus out of control", in addition to valence and arousal (Hipson et al 2021: 1599-1600). The focus of the analysis centered on "contrasting *solitude* with *lonely* but included *alone* as a more *neutral baseline*" (Hipson et al 2021: 1600; emphasis added). Furthermore, paradoxical descriptions of being alone "portrayed as undesirable and isolating, yet at times restorative and rejuvenating" highlight the ambiguity of the word "alone" used in isolation (Hipson et al 2021: 1600). However, when combined with other words relating to "lonely" and "solitude", the divergence in affectivity and valence becomes clearer. One conclusion we can draw from the analysis provided by Hipson et al, is that aloneness can *morph* into either solitude or loneliness over time, on account of the accumulation of either positive or negative life experiences. Loneliness is therefore a specific kind of (de)privation where the absence of social goods has become unliveably unbearable – prompting the appropriate courses of action to overcome this undesirable situation.

Based on the foregoing, we can sum up the phenomenon of loneliness as follows: Firstly, several factors contribute to this emotional state, such as unmet social needs and personality traits like shyness. Agents who are able to attain desired/needed goods without (over)relying on social interactions are less likely to seek group-belongingness and/or less likely to be adversely affected by the lack/loss of group-belongingness. Conversely, for agents unable or less able to attain desired/needed goods—due to unsustainable and unaddressed lack or loss—there is greater urgency in attaining some form of group-belongingness for their needs to be met promptly.

Secondly, whereas loneliness and social isolation tend to be regarded as separate phenomena—loneliness being the *subjective* feeling/experience of having nobody to connect with; social isolation characterized by *physical* lack of social contact, interactions, and relationships—the two become increasingly intertwined with the passage of time. As the discrepancy between desired

outcomes (having friends) and actual state of affairs (lacking friends) persists, spaces that a lonely agent navigates and inhabits become increasingly unhomelike in both appearance and affect. Isolation is no longer simply physical; it becomes a disposition and mindset. Lonely spaces beget a lonely headspace, and vice versa. Corroborating research has found "no differences between measures of objective and subjective social isolation", and that "the influence of both objective and subjective social isolation on risk for mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality" (Holt-Lunstad et al 2015). In other words, feeling like you are (i.e., the subjective experience of being) isolated and *actually* being isolated in physical real-world terms have the same effect on one's subjective well-being (physical, mental, emotional health) – and are therefore, for all intents and purposes, one and the same thing.

Thirdly and finally, loneliness is associated with a plethora of negative health outcomes. Common everyday lived experiences associated with lonely agents include debilitating and demoralizing moods, low self-esteem, listlessness, and so forth. Lonely agents tend to perceive situations as more stressful (Moshtael et al 2024), suggesting that group-belongingness could well provide a desired buffer against the vicissitudes of life. An accretion of negative factors may culminate in loneliness becoming psychopathologically significant at some stage: for example, at the extreme end, chronic loneliness can lead to such conditions/illnesses as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (see Chapter 5 for an in-depth analysis of these adverse mental health outcomes). Highlighting the extremities of loneliness in all its nuances and guises will help broaden our understanding of the varied responses to threats to belongingness.

3.1.2 On Solitude

Thus far, it is clear that loneliness falls on the negative end of the scale of being-by-yourself. The absence of company is sometimes (or perhaps oftentimes) unpleasant and undesirable – but *not always*. In everyday language, we often use terms such as "lonely" and "solitary" interchangeably to describe a variety of *solo* lived experiences. At first glance, these terms may appear to be synonyms: both implicate situations in which you are *on your own*.

However, closer inspection reveals a different story. Arendt (1962) makes the following distinction between loneliness and solitude:

> "Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others. … [T]he lonely man finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore "can be together with himself" since men have the capacity of "talking with themselves." In solitude, in other words, I am "by myself," together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others." (Arendt 1962: 476)

What Arendt has highlighted here is that loneliness is distinguishable from solitude in terms of relationality and realizable sociality: a lonely person seeks connection with others but perhaps struggles to connect, whereas a solitary person is unfazed by her ability to connect with others (probably because she does so seamlessly anyway). What is interesting about this definition is that loneliness can exist even in the company of others. Here, Arendt infers that loneliness is characterized not by missing company per se, but rather the *right kind* of company being missing.

With the right kind of company, an agent feels whole and in tune with oneself (one's self); but with respect to lack/loss thereof, she is disconnected even from herself (her self). Arendt (1962) continues:

> "The problem of solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other. For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them "whole" again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person." (Arendt 1962: 476)

Arendt's depiction of an agent being a "two-in-one" may seem odd at first glance, but when we consider the way being lonely is described using everyday language, this conception makes sense. For instance, we say things like "I am beside myself (with rage etc.)", "I am not feeling (like) myself right now", "what has gotten into me today", and so forth in situations where one is "not quite with it" and somehow not one's *usual self*, hence resultant negative thoughts and feelings *about* oneself. These feelings usually emerge—come to the fore, appearing in one's horizon of awareness—when one is in a state of disarray

and disharmony. This existentially disrupted state of affairs describes a lonely person, who may be feeling disconnected (separated) from herself and somewhat broken. Loneliness unravels one's life in various ways: the air of certainty dissipates, the veneer of unity/harmony disintegrates, and one's life narratives becomes disjointed. From time to time, you may find yourself acting *out of the ordinary*: behaving in ways that are uncharacteristic and unbecoming of you. In solitude mode, however, by way of comparison and contrast, it rather feels like you are acting with full agency and autonomy.

Life is a constant state of flux. Accordingly, positive experiences of being-by-yourself can turn negative, and vice versa, at any given moment. Arendt (1962) postulates that "[s]olitude can become loneliness; this happens when all by myself I am *deserted* by my own self", and that it is a natural attribute of the human lived experience where "[s]olitary men [sic] have always been in danger of loneliness, when they can no longer find the *redeeming grace of companionship* to save them from duality and equivocality and doubt" (Arendt 1962: 476; emphasis added). Thus, "[w]hen loneliness becomes a prolonged and protracted experience, it can be interpreted as *sorrow*" (Svendsen 2017: 38; emphasis added). Extended periods of being apart/away from others eventually erodes your self-worth and self-esteem:

> "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time." (Arendt 1962: 477)

Here, Arendt posits that loneliness impinges on one's potential and capacity for self-fulfilment and self-actualization. For an agent suffering from loneliness, she cannot fully be herself – a condition exacerbated by the lack/loss of meaningful connections with the right people and inaccessibility of necessary social goods. In this respect, a case can be made that

> "we understand who we are only in terms of our relations with others. The way others feel for and care about us as persons shapes and nourishes our self-interpretation. But if others express their concern only in deficient modes, this can undermine our capacity to exist altogether, resulting in a kind of dissolution of the self." (Aho 2022: 11)

Once again, we see how being alone says something about one's relationality with the social world. For a lonely person, her self is somewhat diminished and incomplete without being tethered to a social sphere. For a solitary person, she is more impervious to the absence or presence of others in the constitution of her self: she has no inclination for social participation (Roberts & Krueger 2021: 198) and is quite content being apart from others.

Given the foregoing, two factors become apparent: firstly, even though solitude and loneliness are considered opposites of each other (the former being positively-valenced and the latter being negatively-valenced), neither term captures nor addresses emotional content in the middle (that which is neutrally valenced, hence the analysis in the following subsection); and secondly, we cannot contemplate the valence of being by yourself without invoking temporality. Prolonged periods of being on your own eventually morph into a form of social isolation, wearing down even the most committed introverts. Research on the impact of solitary confinement on the mind and body (e.g., Gallagher 2014, Western et al 2022, Haney 2003) demonstrates that extreme isolation has debilitating long-term effects on those affected, generating intense psychological distress even after release (e.g., through post-traumatic stress disorder). Solitary confinement is a form of involuntary isolation imposed on an individual. In this regard, loneliness shares similar phenomenality. For a lonely agent, it can feel like social isolation and disconnection have been imposed on her by external factors beyond her control; hence, the craving and longing for connection/company/companionship is ever-present. For a solitary agent, the craving and longing for connection/company/companionship is non-existent for the most part. A life of solitude provides the same access to existential goods that are otherwise only accessible through some form of group-belongingness.

Context matters greatly in determining what kinds of being-by-yourself are more akin to solitude rather than loneliness. Taking time out from one's schedule to attend a meditation retreat or hike through the wilderness—alone—are examples of an agent's desire to seek mental clarity, inner peace, and rejuvenation. Notice how the language used to describe these solitary experiences is often overtly positive. Relatedly, think of the multitude of self-help and pop-psychology literature rife with exhortations to "take time out for me-time", "find time to be by yourself, and you will discover your true self",

"indulge in the joy of being alone", and so forth. These moments of being alone are experienced and described as desirable, on account of the agent likely being aware that these moments soon will come to pass. In other words: enjoy these moments *while they last*. In these cases—being alone at a meditation retreat or in a forest—aloneness begins to look more like solitude, and certainly unlike anything that would be considered examples of loneliness. Thus, by examining the words used to describe experiences of solitude and nonsociality, we can grasp a sense of what it is like to feel positively about being-by-yourself.

Solitary ways of life exist in several forms. For an extreme case of solitude, let us take a look at a monk's lived experiences. An agent who devotes himself to a monastic way of life is one who seeks meaning and a sense of belonging through devotion to a faith (or set of spiritual beliefs). Whether Buddhism is a religion or a spiritual way of life is open to debate; however, the fact remains that for a devotee of Buddhism who decides to adopt a monastic life, this is certainly a prescribed spiritual way of life that demands celibacy and renunciation of the usual cravings for sociality and intimacy, therefore fitting the description of a life of *committed* solitude.

The everyday life of a Buddhist monk is centered on individual meditative practice – often all alone, in one's own private quarters. Communication with other monks is minimal and usually limited to such shared activities as allotted mealtimes and public discourses (e.g., readings and recitations of Buddhist texts). A Buddhist monk believes that his way of life—dedication to spiritual practice and rituals, avoiding social contact and materialistic pursuits, and so forth—is meaningful, purposeful, and ultimately rewarding (in this life, *and* the next). He is imbued with a sense that there is something larger at work, and for which he feels a sense of pride and privilege being a part of; therefore, any associated sacrifices (like dispensing with long-term friendships, romance, and wealth) are worth it. For a faith/belief-driven agent, her desire for community extends only insofar as opportunities to practice the necessary rites and rituals alongside others with a shared sense of purpose (i.e., in the company of other monks at a monastery) are present. The life of a monk—characterized by a kind of *radical* solitude—is therefore considered meaningful and fulfilling, on account of this way of life meeting the specific personal, psychological, and spiritual growth needs of this particular agent.

Solitude can be further understood as an opportunity to *rediscover oneself* (Storr 1988). Thus, when monks are interviewed about their chosen way of life, they are likely to describe the detachment from the desires of mainstream society with language associated with the positive benefits of a solitary existence. A solitary existence need not be inimical to sociality. Even for Buddhist monks, they have an identifiable community (within their monastery) to which a sense of belonging can be attributed. Nevertheless, the community of Buddhist monks is more appropriately and accurately characterized as one which encourages and facilitates a way of life conducive to solitude and commensurate with *specific* self-actualization needs. In this regard, a monastic life affords a kind of personally meaningful significance that one would normally otherwise gain from belongingness in the social sphere.

Indeed, there are those who value significance in their lives (e.g., the pursuit of enlightenment) who are able to satisfy this existential need in a solitary, nonbelonging way of life (i.e., as a monk). This is an interesting scenario to consider, since it challenges the orthodoxy of belongingness being a primarily social phenomenon. Solitary agents of this cohort exemplify how various nonsocial forms of relationality—with oneself, with the natural environment, and with the divine—can provide oneself with the *existential nourishment* needed for a fulfilling life. Once again, examining the choice of language used to self-describe experiences of being-by-yourself reveals the intricacies and nuances of how being apart from others shapes your outlook and perspectives on the world and what it can offer you for a fulfilling life. Hipson et al (2021) posit that language regarding solitude would likely point to a more "positive, intrinsic motivation" (Hipson et al 2021: 1600), attracting more pleasant wording (Hipson et al 2021: 1602-1603), corresponding with the claim here that solitude is indeed associated with positive valence.

Indeed, findings in the study by Hipson et al (2021) point to solitude "denoting a more pleasant, restorative, and intrinsically motivated experience of time alone", whereas loneliness "denotes a more unpleasant, stressful, and externally imposed experience of being alone" (Hipson et al 2021: 1605). One conclusion reached is as follows: "[p]eople tend to experience reduced arousal when they spend time alone and when people claim to be enjoying time alone, they report less cognitive effort and activity (e.g., restful) – in contrast with

loneliness more commonly “associated with both momentary and chronic stress, which may explain why lonely occurs among higher arousal terms” (ibid.). Additionally, “solitude tended to co-occur with higher dominance words compared to lonely and alone” (ibid.). Thus, “solitude describes an emotional context that is distinct from loneliness” (Hipson et al 2021: 1606) – and through the language used to describe a variety of one’s lived experiences, sans physical company of others, we are able to differentiate experiences of solitude from experiences of loneliness.

The takeaway from this discussion of experiences and examples of solitude is that, the phenomenon of being-by-yourself is multifaceted (and far more complex than popular renditions of the phenomenon would have us believe) – hence the need for a comprehensive analysis of self-reports and a proper distinction to be made between the different kinds of emotional states. Certain types of belongingness quite clearly and comfortably correspond affectively with the notion of solitude: for instance, the cultural norm of *sisu* (grit, determination, forbearance) found in Finnish culture (as outlined in Chapter 1). In a parallel fashion, certain types of unbelongingness quite clearly and comfortably correspond affectively with the notion of loneliness (as demonstrated by cases of solitary confinement). However, some cases of being-by-yourself are more nuanced, such that absence of social connection or companionship may be experienced neither as negative emotions or reduced agency on one hand nor as positive emotions or enhanced agency on the other hand. Given the richness of experientiality in the grey areas between the polarities of solitude and loneliness, the neutrally-valenced phenomenon of *aloneness* and lived experiences thereof requires further elucidation.

3.1.3 On Aloneness

Having chartered the extremities/polarities of the phenomenality of being-by-yourself, with loneliness at the negative end and solitude at the positive end, we must now account for the richness and nuances of experiences of nonsociality in the middle ground between the extremes/poles. After all, a binary approach is sorely inadequate for charting the conceptual territory of a whole range of social and nonsocial phenomena. Thus, it stands to reason that

a nonbinary approach ought to be applied with respect to the phenomenon of being-by-yourself. Indeed, to navigate the extremities of any phenomenon, it is prudent to (a) dispense with binary conceptualizations, (b) acknowledge that there is a point of neutrality, (c) describe what this neutral (or middle ground) state of affairs is like, and (d) identify real-life examples that fit these more neutral and nuanced descriptions and conceptions.

In light of the plethora of real-life examples of being alone implicating neither solitude nor loneliness, I refer to these neutral affective states as being characterized by *aloneness* – shedding light on lived experiences describable as neither blissful nor despairing. The notion of aloneness has been afforded scant scrutiny in academic literature – a lacuna addressed in this work. Given the rich tapestry of experiential threads woven through the fabric of belongingness, due diligence is required to ensure accurate depictions are afforded to lived experiences that are neither positive nor negative. Bearing in mind how easy it is to confuse the related concepts at hand, it is imperative we wade through the ambiguity to arrive at conceptual clarity – hence this analysis of aloneness as phenomenologically distinct from both loneliness and solitude

The experience of aloneness, standing in contrast to experiences of both solitude and loneliness, is worthy of further explication in view of its relative *obscurity*. Indeed, we need to account for "a range of different words and meanings covering negative, neutral and positive senses of the terms" which may invariably be used to describe a variety of experiences of being on your own (Stern 2022: 2). Between the positive and negative extremities of experiences of being-by-yourself, there are experiences for which neutral moods and emotions are attached and associated. For instance, someone who is single seeking friendship (or more) may visit her local café and strike up conversations with strangers. As for someone who is chronically lonely and socially awkward, he may seek friendship via virtual means (e.g., online chat groups; see section 3.4 for further analysis of virtual belongingness in attenuating loneliness and social anxiety). And as for someone who is solitary (in solitude mode), she may well do neither of these things – being happy and content in her own company, frequently enjoying spending time by herself.

To assess what state of being-by-oneself is most applicable in any given context, we can infer the kinds of social goods that are either present or absent

in an agent's life and observe what impact any absences may have on her mental health and overall well-being. In the previous analysis of loneliness, I presented this phenomenon as comprising the loss or lack of existential goods specifically, not just any kind of absence. The implication in this qualification is that, while the absence of existential goods can be experienced in different ways, not all forms of absence (e.g., aloneness) implicate loneliness. There are forms of absence that are value-neutral, capturing a range of experientiality characterized by self-satisfaction despite one's life consisting of elements of nonsociality. In view of this conceptual distinction, (de)privation cannot be immediately and automatically inferred from absence, the same way it can from loss and lack. For solitary agents, as discussed in the previous subsection, their needs and desires can be satisfied through independent endeavors, having in their possession the requisite means to achieve their goals, confidently and self-assuredly so. When something is absent, however, it is *simply* non-existent. Therefore, negative valence does not hinge on non-existence in *mere* absence, in the same manner in which negative valence hinges on non-existence in the loss and lack variants.

Take for instance football skills and how much they matter in a given context. A footballer who is past his prime, unable to play top-level football anymore, may be described has having a loss of skills. In contrast, a footballer who has never played top-level football may be described as having a lack of skills. Both footballers may well have had vested interests in playing top-level football at some point in their respective careers, so any non-existence of skills in the present moment will count as (de)privation. Of course, for the retired ex-professional footballer, his loss of skills (due to old age, lack of a fitness/training regime, various health issues, etc.) impacts him more severely, certainly in financial terms (being unable to play for top clubs anymore). For the amateur footballer, presumably he has another form of income as his mainstay, largely playing football for the social and recreational benefits, in which case his lack of skills is *no loss* in material terms; in other words, not really an impingement on his life fulfilment in the grand scheme of things. As for a non-footballer, the non-existence of football skills will not count as (de)privation—lack or loss—of either kind, since he is unlikely to have had any vested interests in a football career of any sorts anyway. Sure, he may well be a football fan too, but one can certainly

enjoy football as a sport, a recreational outlet, and the culture associated with it despite not possessing the necessary skills to excel in the game (or indeed play it at all). Thus, for a non-footballer, footballing skills are *superfluous* to his pursuit of a life of self-fulfilment. Herein lies the nuance in absence: with both lack and loss being *subsets* of absence, experiences of absence captured by neither lack nor loss warrant due investigation and explication.

For the sake of clarity and parsimony regarding the variance in experiences of being-by-yourself, I once again reference the work of Hipson et al (2021) to "distinguish between the concepts alone, lonely, and solitude as denoting *different motivations* toward and experiences of solitude" (Hipson et al 2021: 1597; emphasis added). For the authors, to be alone means something different from loneliness and solitude, and as such there are "implications both for how we understand different experiences of time alone in general and for what kind of language we should use when discussing these experiences" (Hipson et al 2021: 1596). The experience of being alone vastly differs from person to person. Just as "one man's [sic] meat is another man's [sic] poison", as the saying goes, *one person's blissful solitude is another person's sorrowful loneliness*. Of course, bar committed hermits, most individuals—even the most ardent practitioners of *sisu* (Finnish forbearance)—still need some form of sociality, for as Svendsen reminds us: "[e]ven though we choose solitude, we are *still* social creatures" (Svendsen 2017: 124; emphasis added). The inclination for social connection is, in a sense, coded in the human constitution.

Nevertheless, it remains an inescapable fact that, for some agents, being on their own is enjoyable and generally positively valenced: allowing for quiet contemplation, focus on creative pursuits, and other activities where the presence of others sullies one's life projects at hand. Agents predisposed to seeking moments of solitude *make time and space for being alone*. For introverted types, being alone is often comforting and invigorating, being liberated from the intrusiveness of the presence of others. In aloneness, an agent is able to have her needs met by *intrapersonal* rather than interpersonal means. Conversely, for extroverted types, being alone may be disconcerting and debilitating,[29] being confronted with the eeriness of the absence of others.

[29] See, for example, this Guardian report on extroverts—referencing studies in the UK and the US, struggling with the effects of lockdown—being deprived of the rewards of social interaction:

All agents fall somewhere along the introversion-extroversion continuum, meaning that some balance must be struck between nonsociality and sociality for a well-adjusted life. In a state of aloneness, one does not *yearn* for sociality, instead finding contentment in nonbelonging. There is no value judgment toward the absence of sociality: only a recognition that she is *not-with-others*.

The state of not-being-with-others certainly deserves further explication. At a surface level, it means not having any company in a physical setting to interact with. But what about settings where interactions take place without the participants inhabiting the same physical space? Can you be with someone, separated by time and distance? Could it be said that individuals connecting via their respective electronic devices in real time are nonetheless together in a sense? Or are they individually by themselves? Hipson et al (2021) propose the following distinction between "alone" and "lonely": "Alone is construed as a state in which one is removed from social interaction, lonely (loneliness) is a dissatisfaction with the quality of our social interactions and solitude denotes a positive state of voluntary aloneness" (Hipson et al 2021: 1596). For a definition of aloneness, the authors settle on what they call the "convenient view" that "alone simply refers to a *neutral state of physical separation* from other people" (Hipson et al 2021: 1597; emphasis added), further acknowledging that aloneness tends to be affectively ambiguous (Hipson et al 2021: 1598), in particular with respect to colloquial language usage. For Horowski (2022), "aloneness on an ontic level [is] a *morally neutral state*" (Horowski 2022: 277; emphasis added), and not just an affectively neutral state. Similarly, for Dubas (2022), aloneness is attributable to ambivalence (Dubas 2022: 265), which is essentially a neutral state of mind, as illustrated in the following diagram:

URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/14/extroverts-likely-suffer-higher-mental-health-toll-covid-lockdown>

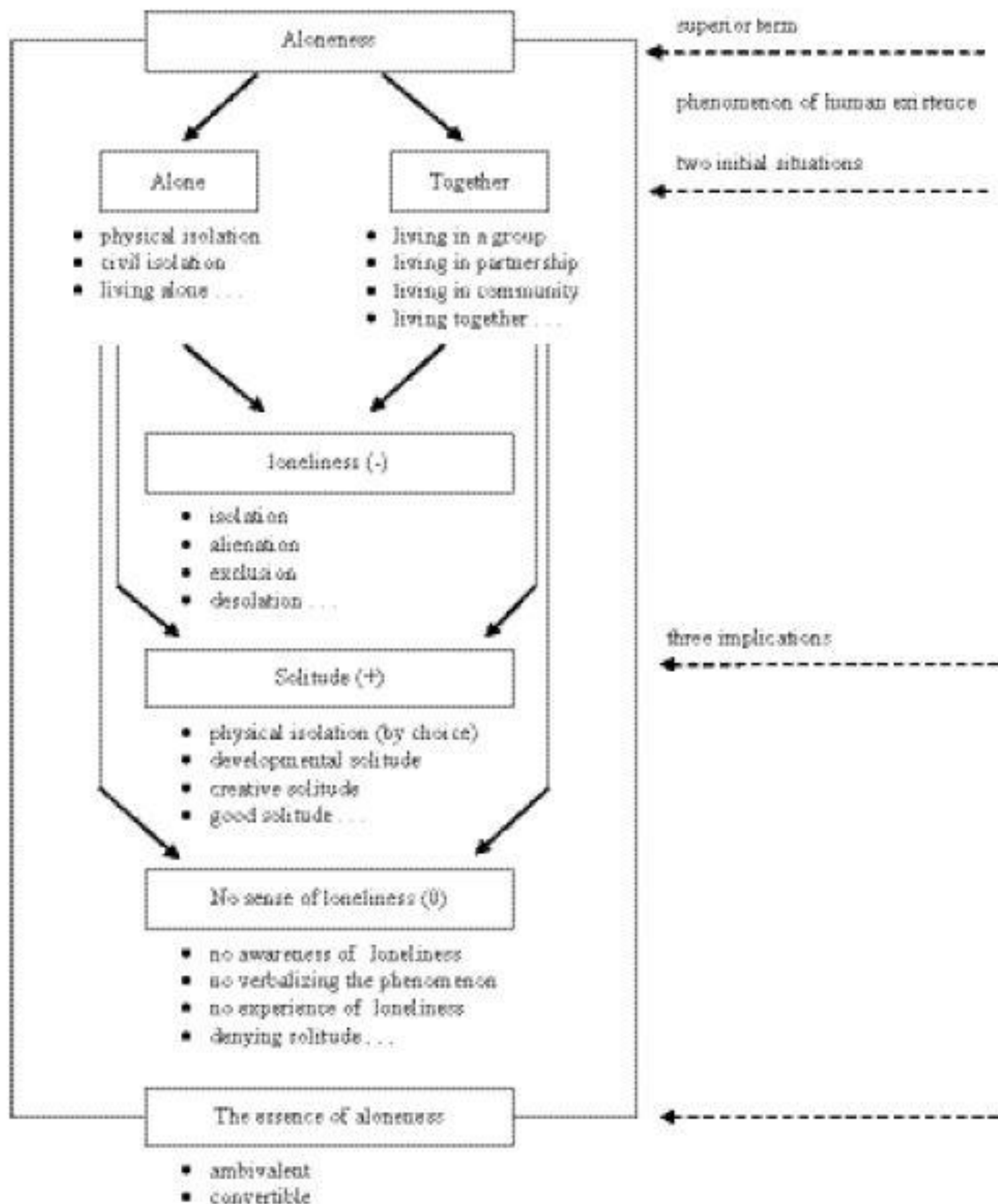

Fig. 1. Flowchart showing Dubas' interpretation of aloneness (Dubas 2022: 263).

The flowchart above maps out the relationship between the phenomenon of aloneness (represented by a "0" symbol to denote neutral valence), contrasted to the phenomena of loneliness (represented by a "-" symbol to denote negative valence) and solitude (represented by a "+" symbol to denote positive valence). Note how aloneness in Dubas' framing is also depicted as the *default state* from

which solitary and lonely lived experiences arise. The corollary of this is that the state of aloneness *precedes* other affective states (solitude and loneliness); and through intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions, aloneness may convert into these other states (solitude and loneliness), although not necessarily the case *all the time*. Thus, aloneness occupies *ambivalent affective territory* in the oscillations between antithetical (positive and negative) experiences of being-by-yourself (Dubas 2022: 268). To this end, we can reframe solitude as “positive aloneness” and loneliness as “negative aloneness” – rendering aloneness a separate phenomenon characterized by neither positive nor negative affect/valence (or perhaps some combination of both that aggregates to a neutrally affective/valenced state of affairs).

To further explicate this un(der)explored phenomenon of aloneness (characterized by neutral moods/emotions), let us consider the example of a committed bachelor, to differentiate a lifestyle characterized by aloneness from a lifestyle characterized by loneliness. A committed bachelor is one who seeks *freedom, autonomy, and peace of mind* above all else. This type of agent is typically unburdened and unperturbed by sociocultural norms, as the case may be, to marry and procreate. To this end, he avoids having to deal with the social taboos and strife others face; for instance, realizing and acknowledging that you regret having children, dealing with the fallout among shared friendship groups and networks when breakups happen (made ever worse when infidelity is also implicated in the relationship drama, generating a whirlwind of rumors and gossip), and so forth. Saying you wish you didn't have kids is often taken as you wishing your kids weren't born - which no doubt sounds harsh and cruel. But what you are really saying is, you wish you had explored other/further options along your life journey first, free from familial and peer pressure, before committing yourself one way or another – for the rest of your life.

In the case of a committed bachelor, he likely has already made up his mind that not having a family of his own is a price worth paying, for the sake of experience, and thus a sacrifice worth making – seeing as a life brimming with unbridled adventure, grabbing the bull by its horns in seizing whatever opportunities life has to offer, and a lack of burdensome, demanding family-related obligations render a spouse-free, child-free life far more personally appealing and meaningful. Note that the committed bachelor type likely shares

similar personal values and personality traits with the digital nomad type: they both love marching to the beat of their own drum. The absence of company for a committed bachelor is therefore likely an affectively neutral state of affairs. (In some respects, the absence of the immediacy of others attached to your life is perhaps even positively valenced. For instance, not having dependents reliant on you constitutes a similar kind of freedom and independence as that which a pro-solitude agent pursues and values highly.) Thus, rather like a digital nomad, a committed bachelor's way of life is characterized by nonbelongingness in a general sense. In a similar fashion to how the need to identify strongly with a particular city or locale is a relatively low priority for a digital nomad, the need to identify strongly with a particular community or interest group may be a low(er) priority for a committed bachelor. Nevertheless, like anyone else, committed bachelors and digital nomads have companionship and romantic needs to be fulfilled. However, these needs may not be as urgent or desperate, say, in comparison to someone who is plagued with loneliness. For these types of agents who are *alone but not lonely*, their attitude to group-belongingness is likely somewhat ambivalent and nuanced.

Ambivalence toward group-belongingness is the key factor distinguishing ways of life characterized by aloneness (e.g., a committed bachelor) from ways of life characterized by loneliness (e.g., a new migrant). And although ways of life characterized by aloneness share with ways of life characterized by solitude (e.g., a monk) a similar ambivalence towards group-belongingness, there are subtle yet distinguishing differences. For example, rather unlike a monk for whom companionship and romance do not matter, the likes of committed bachelors and digital nomads still have social needs (such as companionship and romance); they have by no means renounced the world of sociality entirely. In being alone, group-belongingness still holds some personal appeal – but perhaps not to the same degree or extent as its appeal to the lonely.

For reasons outlined above, and as I will explore in greater depth in Chapter 4, the lonely (as opposed to the alone) are more prone to seeking belongingness in fringe or extremist groups and communities – membership of which, in some cases, may not be in the lonely agents' best interests, seeing as they are somewhat desperate to overcome their social disconnection and therefore likely to be susceptible to such pitfalls as ill-judgement and impetuous

decision-making. In a state of aloneness, however, such desperation for connection/company/companionship is unlikelier to hold sway in quite the same fashion. For the alone but not lonely, the social world is still within one's grasp.

These cases of lifestyles found in the grey areas between the social and the nonsocial reveal the richness of lived experiences characterized neither by solitude nor loneliness. Given foregoing analyses, we can make the following observations about the phenomenon of aloneness. Firstly, identifying neutral moods/emotions with respect to experiences of being-by-yourself shed new light on nuances in nonsocial lived experiences. These nuances further reveal (a) the complexity and diversity in experiences of absence; in particular, that not all lived experiences of absence are characterized by negative valence – neutral valence permeates a wide range of lived experiences that warrant proper acknowledgement; and (b) that while loss and lack are necessarily instances of absence, not all absence is experienced as loss or lack.

Secondly, the richness in neutral nonsocial experientiality (captured by experiences of aloneness) parallels the richness in neutral social experientiality (captured by experiences of a phenomenon I refer to as *nonbelongingness* – see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on how nonbelongingness differs from unbelongingness). In other words, there are neutral ways in encountering the world *by yourself*, just as much as there are neutral ways in encountering the world *with others*, that are *philosophically intriguing and insightful*.

Thirdly, in distinguishing aloneness from loneliness, we gain a clearer understanding of the particular kinds of absences—specifically, absences characterized by (and experienced as) lack and/or loss—more likely to motivate actions geared toward the attainment of social connection and interaction, including why these motivations exist and how they play out in the social world.

Lived experiences of aloneness have much to reveal about the drive to belong – or, as the case may be, the drive to *refrain* from belonging. Fleshing out these nuances will help us navigate the complexities and intricacies of nonsocial and social needs and the affective territories they occupy, across the vast (and oftentimes precarious) landscape of belongingness.

3.1.4 Summary

In light of foregoing considerations, we can conclude that there is certainly a "conceptual distinction between positive and negative experiences of time alone" (Hipson et al 2021: 1607). Loneliness may comprise any of the following factors: social isolation, alienation, withdrawal, abandonment, ostracism, rejection, and so forth. A lonely person may experience dejection, listlessness, and a general malaise about her existence, exposing a lack of succor in difficult and uncertain times. Thus, the state of loneliness is usually negatively valenced. In other words, being lonely generally feels unpleasant, and a lonely agent would rather not be so. Loneliness feels awful, and it also makes you feel bad *about yourself*. To this end, the findings of Hipson et al (2021) validate the postulation in this work that there are indeed three variants of experientiality pertaining to being-by-yourself (or being-on-your-own): solitude (positively-valenced), aloneness (neutrally-valenced), and loneliness (negatively-valenced). This tripartite taxonomy of the experience of being-by-yourself mirrors the taxonomy of the experience of *being-with-others* I have proposed: *belongingness* (positively-valenced), *nonbelongingness* (neutrally-valenced), and *unbelongingness* (negatively-valenced), a detailed analysis of which can be found in the following chapter. Given the spectrum of affective states—positive, neutral, and negative—associated with both sociality and nonsociality, the language constructs with which we utilize to describe our lived experiences provide vital clues and details in explicating the "*what-it-is-like*"-ness of not being graced by the presence of others.

Based on foregoing considerations, we can advance the claim that solitude (and descriptive language thereof) is characterized by the *superfluousness* of the other; aloneness (and descriptive language thereof) is characterized by the *absence* of the other; and loneliness (and descriptive language thereof) is characterized by the *lack/loss* of the other. It is important that we flesh out the nuances of solitude, aloneness, and solitude—being different expressions of the state of being-by-yourself—by taking note of the conceptual differences between absence, lack, and loss. Applying this taxonomy to experiences of solitude, aloneness, and loneliness, we can advance the claim that experiences of loneliness implicate and predict lack or loss of most (if not *all*) of the pillars of belongingness; whereas with respect to

experiences of aloneness and solitude (and especially the latter), it is not immediately obvious which pillars of belongingness (*if any*) are missing, particularly when/where access to existential goods remains intact.

Indeed, not all forms of nonsociality are associated with lack or loss, and this is the case for experiences of aloneness, which Dubas (2022) describes as ambivalence. An alone agent is unbothered by the social world around her. Where an agent experiences an absence of sociality, an absence which is neither positive nor negative, not being with others has no material bearing on her: she is alone but *not* lonely. Aloneness does not impact on her negatively. It may even be the case that her aloneness empowers her (in which case her disposition might be more akin to solitude). Pivoting away from the social world may be attributable to a pursuit of a quieter way of life (e.g., she generally likes keeping to herself), or an embracing of a new way of life (e.g., she is recently divorced and has decided to put herself first). Thus, whether you are (or feel) lonely, alone, or solitary predicates on your orientation toward the world, and in turn predicts your integration (and re-integration) in the world. Following from this, how well one is integrated in the world may predict one's susceptibility to being drawn to toxic forms of belongingness (a topic examined in section 4.3). The ramifications of prolonged loneliness (which in some cases lead to *antisocial*, not just nonsocial, behaviors) raise important and urgent considerations in the realms of mental health and civil order, where matters pertaining to the personal and the interpersonal intertwine.

Prolonged periods of lack/loss of sociality render the isolated and the alienated unwell, revealing a plethora of perils, pitfalls, and perturbations. In situations "when people are socially isolated or marginalized, loneliness motivates a reestablishment of social contacts that are necessary to the welfare and survival of the once lonely individual" (Rokach 2019: 6). For lonely individuals, there is a diminished sense of self, agency, and purpose. Arendt (1998) notes that it is through action that a person's identity is disclosed, recognized, and actualized. Following this reasoning, a connection can be made between inaction and loneliness. As per Putnam (2000), those who are not well integrated in their social environment are more susceptible to a variety of medical conditions – including mental illnesses (a theme explored in depth in Chapter 5), which "can undermine the person's ability to conceive of herself as

a unified self over time and with it the possibility of living out fulfilling life projects and plans" (Rashed 2021: 307). Being disconnected from the social world, lacking a sense of belonging in a community, an agent's access to existential goods is precarious. To this end, examples of belongingness are put to the test and placed under a lens in the remaining sections of this chapter.

In section 3.2, I examine how the COVID-19 pandemic shattered the foundations of belongingness for individuals across the globe in several ways. Various elements of safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom in the everyday lives of ordinary folk eroded and deteriorated as government mandated measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus resulted in social networks, livelihoods, routines, and norms being severely and irrevocably disrupted. As we scrambled to re-establish the pillars propping up our homelike existences, perhaps we have had the opportunity to reflect on what truly matters to us as we rediscovered our place in the world.

In section 3.3, I highlight how social disconnection has distinct flavors in East Asian sociocultural contexts. For example, shame plays a major role in the regulation of behavioral norms in Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean societies steeped in Confucian values. Being on your own, which carries positive connotations in Western cultural contexts (e.g., relating to solitude and solo pursuits), rings different in more collectivistic cultures such as those in China, Japan, and South Korea. Within these contexts, where higher priority is accorded to collective interests, individual needs are sometimes/oftentimes *subsumed* under considerations of the greater good. Given the social pressures to conform to cultural norms being pervasive in these societies, struggles to fit in or belong somewhere produce unique adaptive responses.

In section 3.4, I survey various ways in which conventional and novel uses of virtual technology—the internet, social media, and smart devices—have pervaded and become normalized in modern everyday life. Connecting with known and unknown others through online means of communication is a convenience as well as a lifeline. For the lonely, alienated, social anxious, isolated, and depressed, the virtual world offers new possibilities and alternatives to connect, interact, and belong.

Social connection is a privilege not enjoyed by all. Forces beyond our control threaten our sense of belonging in unknown and unexpected ways. Responses to the disintegration of the pillars of belongingness vary in degrees of success. The selected range of case studies analyzed in the following sections share a similar theme: belongingness, when in jeopardy, may be reimagined, reoriented, and rediscovered in various adaptive ways such that a safe, trusted, accepting, familiar, and free existence can be successfully rebuilt.

3.2 Unprecedented Global Events, Social Isolation, and Uprootedness: Revisiting the Pandemic Years

The third decade of the 21st century has so far been a rather eventful one, albeit for all the wrong reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war between Israel and Palestine, economic woes at a national level, escalating rates of crime and violence in society, financial strife on a personal level – the list is seemingly endless. These events have rattled the world and in fact continue to reverberate throughout society, disrupting a sense of regularity and normalcy in our daily lives and henceforth introducing anguish, angst, and anxiety in our immediate horizon of awareness. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, presents us with a rich case study in the pillars of belongingness—safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom—being put to the test in a multitude of ways. Let us consider a few here.

Firstly, *safety being compromised*. Public spaces became potentially hazardous for the spread of the COVID-19 virus, rendering the personal and medical safety of everyone potentially vulnerable. At the start of the pandemic, media-hyped and politically-driven panic about people from China (and Asia in general) being not just spreaders but the originators of the COVID-19 virus resulted in numerous incidences of Chinese and other Asian individuals fearing for their safety, having come under verbal, psychic, and physical attacks.

Secondly, *trust being violated*. An erosion of trust developed on several fronts: trust of others (as potential carriers of the COVID-19 virus, or

alternatively anti-vaxxers hellbent on subverting scientific progress), trust of spaces (as potentially infected with the COVID-19 virus), trust of a nation's institutions and authorities (regarding factual dissemination of COVID-19 information and perhaps underlying nefarious agendas), trust of medical science (whether the vaccines were effective, whether the side effects of vaccines were downplayed and thus risks worth taking, etc.), and so forth.

Thirdly, *acceptance being withdrawn*. Those who were infected with the COVID-19 virus (or suspected as such) were treated differently (discriminatorily so) and found their presence in certain spaces unwelcome. Others who (for various medical or personal reasons) chose not to get vaccinated were denied entry into most venues and establishments. The government of New Zealand, then led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the pandemic years, imposed strict quarantine rules on expats (fellow citizens) returning to the country during periods of national lockdown, with public opinion toward returning expats being incredibly hostile.[30] These individuals (and many more) experienced what it is like to not be accepted, on the basis of their medical condition (being infected), vaccination status, or philosophical disposition toward being vaccinated.

Fourthly, *familiarity being eroded*. The pandemic brought about a New Normal where things would never quite be the same again. Familiar norms such as handshaking disappeared almost overnight. Spaces and walkways, for a time, were reorganized in such a way that social distancing could be enforced, forcing us to navigate spaces that no longer appeared familiar. Everchanging rules and measures over the course of weeks and months meant uninvited, unprecedented disruptions to daily routines and work schedules. Regular life had become somewhat uncanny, unrecognizable, and untenable.

Fifthly and finally, *freedom(s) being curtailed*. Those who were infected, unvaccinated, or without proper documentation (e.g., a 'Covid passport') had travel restrictions imposed on them. Academics, journalists, medical professionals, and others who expressed concerns about the safety of vaccines (e.g., that they were rushed and not properly tested, that the associated side effects were downplayed, and so forth) were harassed, vilified, and silenced.

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[30] URL = <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/419757/it-s-not-so-kind-rise-in-hostility-towards-nzers-looking-to-come-home>

These are all examples of various personal and political freedoms (e.g., freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of belief, etc.) being unceremoniously abrogated.

Indeed, as lockdowns and social distancing measures were implemented in one country after another, citizens around the world had their lives suddenly upended. As a result, the foundations of our lives, propped up by the five pillars, fractured and crumbled. The New Normal meant rebuilding our lives—our pillars of belongingness—to adapt to a new world with new norms.

3.2.1 Fear and Loathing in the New Normal

Times of uncertainty and insecurity produce strong emotional responses in us. And the most prominent emotion of all is fear: fearing for one's health, for one's life, for one's livelihood, and for one's loved ones. Fear rattles all the pillars of belongingness. That which may normally be taken for granted, henceforth comes to the fore in one's horizon of awareness. Previous innocuous bodily responses now warrant heightened attention and, in some cases, take on new meaning with the advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic. A sneeze or cough is no longer just that; it might be indicate of a symptom of—i.e., a sign that you have—the virus: a sign that becomes apparent to you, and to the world, demanding immediate corrective courses of actions. And as the COVID-19 pandemic raged from 2020 onwards, we witnessed mass panic in the form of rushing for, fighting over, and hoarding basic household supplies such as toilet paper and hand sanitizer (Leung et al 2021). Additionally, lockdowns, social distancing, and other measures curtailed our social lives in draconian and intrusive ways. We could no longer participate in the public sphere as before, being forced to retreat into our private spaces. Suddenly, our daily routines were shaken up and torn asunder. We began withdrawing into our private spaces, afraid to mix and mingle in the public sphere as we have always done. Disruption to normality and regularity of lives, norms, and expectations is well encapsulated in the following assessment by Aho (2022):

> "The forced isolation, the halting of face-to-face visits, the end of group activities and exercise classes, even the presence of masks and hand washing protocols, all disrupted the embodied flow of daily life, stripping away the familiar hold we have on

> things. And this is … the very definition of the *uncanny*, of *not feeling at-home*." (Aho 2022: 9; emphasis added)

Emerging from lockdowns, we were faced with the unenviable prospect of having to construct new ways of reminding us of the world as we knew it, grasping for the familiar and that which provided safety and comfort. In some cases, we were faced with the impossible task of choosing a limited number of others who would form part of our safety bubbles; this became the extent of one's connectedness to the social world. The New Normal that emerged ushered in a new era where our shared reality had altered significantly.

Stepping out into this New Normal, it felt as though threats of infection lurked everywhere; you wore a mask, kept your distance, and sanitized your hands regularly to stay *safe*. Your once-*familiar* environment now appeared to you in uncanny new ways. As you navigated your stomping ground, things somehow felt eerily different. People you encountered seemed less jovial and more irritable. Nobody shook hands anymore, maintaining their social distance. Your favorite pub would no longer *accept* patrons unless they were vaccinated; some of your friends chose not to be, therefore unable to join you for afterwork drinks. Henceforth, you discovered that different opinions about the pandemic and how it was managed (or indeed how/why it started) began to cause tension and polarization within your circle of friends; pro-vaxxers and anti-vaxxers would accuse each other of spreading misinformation and disinformation, leading to a breakdown in *trust*. Travel restrictions and other measures to stem the spread of the virus impinged on your *freedom* of movement. You wondered whether the government was doing the right thing, as you found yourself being censored on social media platforms simply for asking questions; posts you shared on social media were either taken down or slapped with cease-and-desist notices. Your colleagues may have experienced similar curtailments of freedom of expression, having been warned by managers about sharing articles or tweets from "unvetted sources". What a strange new world we now live in, you mused to yourself with great consternation.

For an agent to cope in times of turmoil and uncertainty, maintaining her grip on the world and some semblance of normality becomes a higher priority. The pandemic-stricken world presents itself with new unknowns and horrors. This twisted new reality pushes back on us, intruding into spaces once

traversed without giving much forethought. Under normal circumstances, being in touch with the familiar has a grounding effect; it establishes what is tangible and dependable. In moments of trepidation, an agent is likely to find her sphere of sociality being an anchor amidst turbulent tides. She may find herself exercising greater caution in social interactions, especially with strangers. Stepping outside the comfort and safety of one's home after extended periods of self-isolation, the world feels different. Once-familiar spaces are now permeated with a miasma of uncanniness. Footpaths and streets are marked with symbols and signs, reminding you to keep your distance from others. Your local park is eerily empty, apart from discarded facemasks scattered about. You approach your usual park bench for old time's sake—you have pleasant memories of sitting there, reading your favorite books—stopping in your tracks mere steps away to ponder whether it might be covered in germs. The piles of trash next to the bench compound your fear of germs. Somehow the park does not seem so comforting anymore, especially when you look around and notice the general state of unkemptness – a stark reminder of a general state of abandonment of public spaces, even as lockdown measures begin to ease.

Moreover, as you wander around the park, you are struck by the realization that the once-familiar setting you have traversed multiple times before now takes on new meaning and appears unnervingly uncanny. How odd, you muse to yourself. As a sense of emptiness sets in, you begin to wonder how you have overlooked this fact before: that without the presence and warmth of human activity, shared spaces feel cold and lifeless. Other than the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze, the park is eerily silent. It dawns upon you that your friends, who were supposed to meet you there for a quick and long overdue catch-up, are frustratingly nowhere in sight and (for whatever reason) not responding to your text messages. You sense yourself getting mildly irritated and anxious. Moreover, as you glance over to the other side of the park, you notice a group of youth whose presence makes you feel uneasy. You have seen them hang out in the park before; but somehow, they now seem hostile and menacing. You proceed to turn around and leave.

As you exit the park, you tell yourself: perhaps it is time to find another spot, or another public space altogether. This space that was once familiar, where it felt safe to navigate and free to do as you pleased, now seems rather

uninviting and off-putting. Something does not feel right. This space used to be your stomping-ground. Now the park as a whole no longer feels homelike: once-familiar sights and sounds henceforth take on sinister new meanings and interpretations. Fear and anxiety, never present before, begin arising. You feel a shift in your attitude toward this public space. There is a distortion in your experiencing of this environment, leaving you feeling let down and even *betrayed*. Perhaps I ought to spend more time by myself in the comforts of my own abode, you tell yourself. At least this is someplace where I can feel *safe* in *familiar* and *trusted* surroundings—my very own abode—already appropriately scaffolded for my existential needs, where *acceptance* is no issue, and where I am *free* to be myself and do as I please.

The above analogy is a snapshot of a relatable example many of us may have experienced as we emerged from lockdowns and reacquainted ourselves with the post-pandemic world. In encountering the New Normal, assessing what to makes of this and what to do about it, we were compelled to re-evaluate, re-negotiate, and re-establish the pillars of a homelike existence. Not only is a lockdown-weary (and virus-wary) agent confronted with greater awareness (hence heightened vigilance) of her emotional vulnerability and existential precarity; she is overwhelmed by a new reality that no longer evokes the same personal meaning and relatability as before. As Trigg observes: "Into this fragmented scene, things no longer assume the value they once did; the everyday itself as a nexus of relational meanings loses referential value and, as a result, a sense of anxiety permeates much of life" (Trigg 2022: 108). The everyday nature of what has been disrupted in a post-pandemic world—in essence, *all* the pillars of belongingness—generates anxiety associated with contemplations of alternate possible futures where things are less certain and stable. There is no template for a typical adaptive response to the existential upheaval brought about by a cataclysmic event such as the pandemic. We were sorely unprepared. Thus, we are venturing into unchartered territory here.

3.2.2 Disorientation and Reorientation

Seeking surety and certainty in a transient and transitory world can be a challenging task if you are by yourself, without others to relate to or rely on, and

in a state of general unpreparedness. The post-pandemic world we have emerged to is one plagued with mental health struggles; in particular, feeling lonely. Indeed, some individuals have felt abandoned and detached during the pandemic, isolated from the social sphere, and altogether alienated. Loneliness can have adverse effects on one's mental health and personal well-being. As Arendt (1962) points out, "loneliness is at the same time contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition and one of the fundamental experiences of every human life" (Arendt 1962: 475). There was a disconcerting sense that things shouldn't be this way. A life untethered from the social world is a diminished life lacking in vitality and spontaneity, features of a happy life.

Indeed, there are basic existential needs that must be present for one to maintain a grip on reality and a foot in survival-mode: "[i]n isolation, man [sic] remains in contact with the world as the human artifice; only when the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world, is destroyed, isolation becomes altogether unbearable" (Arendt 1962: 475). An agent who is feeling lost in life likely suffers some form of mental anguish, on account of "this global feeling of abandonment [having] disrupted the fundamental meaning structures that make it possible to cope with the world, relate to others, and make sense of who we are" (Aho 2022: 6). Then again, extended periods of time to ourselves like never before have also provided us with ample opportunities to ponder the state of one's life. We were compelled to rethink and re-evaluate what matters to us. For some, this is an opportunity to reinvent oneself, to start afresh, to resurrect unfinished projects, to tie up loose ends, to make amends with old friends, and so forth. There is a greater urgency in accomplishing life goals, seeing as life is fragile and you never know when *your time is up*. You realize you are an *unfinished project* in a sense, and that you need to *get on* with things. Perhaps it is time to *reach out* to friends. Or *reach within* for strength to carry on (alone).

The pandemic has certainly given the status quo a good shake-up. For some agents, the disruption to their lives has exacerbated the feeling that they are running out of time to tick off their existential bucket list: the idea that they could cease to exist at any moment, leaving behind a trail of unfinished business, induces stress and anxiety. In an existentially disruptive life event (such as the pandemic has proven to be), where many experienced being

untethered from norms, routines, and connections that kept them grounded, access to existential goods conferred through modes of belongingness has become a matter of utmost urgency. The malaise, melancholy, and mayhem the pandemic has wrought on the lives of so many is captured as follows:

> "Just as much *out there* was the pervasive melancholy that set in during the coronavirus pandemic. It wasn't just a matter of personal unhappiness or wariness, nor could it be reduced to the frustration of being under lockdown and being sheltered in place for weeks and months that soon became an entire year. Rather, an atmosphere of intangible yet inescapable foreboding hung over many of those in areas of high contagion or on their fringes. There were few visible signs of this dark emotionality other than images on television of highly distressed people, yet it hung over all who were subject to it, portentous and persistent. It was *in the air*, everywhere." (Casey 2022: 187; original emphasis)

This sense of foreboding, left to linger, develops into a form of suffering and breakdown in meaning, exposing the vulnerability of human existence (Svenaeus 2018: 18). The impact of the pandemic has been far reaching, affecting us on a personal and interpersonal level. In the latter respect, there has been a discernible withdrawal from social life and public spaces as we required time and space to ourselves to make sense of the scale of personal disruption to our lives and life plans.

Faced with uncertainty moving forward, an agent seeks something—anything—to grasp onto, to provide a sense of surety and being grounded. During lockdowns, unable to be with loved ones, an agent felt distraught, isolated, and alienated. Deprived of company, and with physical human contact out of reach, she yearned for a sense of connectedness—communion with others—to get her through the tough times. In this manner, belongingness acts as an anchor in a sea of impermanence. Coming face-to-face with the facticity of the "thrownness"—to borrow a Heideggerian (1962) term—of her lived experience in the world can be a daunting task; hence, doing so with the support of (or simply being alongside) others helps assuage the stresses, worries, and anxieties plaguing her. Moreover, the collective thrownness that has been the pandemic—an arbitrary, unexpected, and unwarranted nexus of events that was altogether confounding and oppressive—thrusted as all into a collective conundrum where the burdens borne were individuated. With uncertainty comes fragmentation of an otherwise structured existence. As the

pillars of belongingness crumble, hurling us into an uncertain future—re-scaffolded in uncanny new ways that fail to afford us the same levels of safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom we once enjoyed—we are compelled to adapt and respond to an unusual new reality permeated with trepidation, fear, and a great deal of loathing.

The long-term impact of the pandemic lingers through the global mental health crisis. Scores of individuals have reported feeling lonely and isolated during periods of lockdown, unable to connect meaningfully with loved ones. Lonely agents respond to being lonely in a variety of ways, ranging from acceptance (relinquishing a desire to change one's circumstances) to action (doing whatever it takes to change one's circumstances). A commonly reported response to the New Normal took the form of adjustment and reorientation to a more reclusive way of life. Being out of touch with society for too long, many have simply gotten used to this way of life. For example, many who worked from home during the pandemic have continued doing so post-pandemic – with statistics demonstrating that, as of April 2024, 10% of the UK workforce works from home all the time and 29% does so some of the time.[31] These trends are unlikely to abate anytime soon, as many workers have acclimatized to this new type of working arrangement. Some who opt for working from home either some or all of the time in all likelihood to do to minimize social interactions.

The silver lining in the work-from-home phenomenon, symptomatic of an adaptive response to a world altered beyond personal levels of comfort, is that these agents remain productive and tethered to the outside world. In other cases, however, agents remain in self-imposed isolation, having developed (or exacerbated pre-existing) social anxiety or depression. In choosing to remain in self-isolation, some find comfort and solace in a new listless, mundane everyday routine confined indoors. This could be in part due to a realization that there is little point in trying to re-establish one's connection with a world that one struggled to fit in to begin with. If there is one noticeable trend emerging from the pandemic years, it would be a global rise in loneliness. A systematic review conducted in 2022 detected noticeable increases in incidences of loneliness globally, compared to the pre-pandemic era (Ernst et al 2022).

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[31] URL = <https://www.forbes.com/uk/advisor/business/remote-work-statistics/ - "UK Remote and Hybrid Working Statistics (2024)">

Indeed, the lonely respond and adapt to their unbelongingness (loneliness, alienation, displacement, etc.) in a variety of different ways.

As countries around the world, one by one, emerged from lockdown measures, various schemes were implemented by respective governments to stimulate the economy and encourage the population to re-engage in public life. In the UK, the "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme was introduced,[32] albeit with mixed results.[33] Nevertheless, this was an example of a Western society where its political leaders held a particular perspective on how a sense of normality and regularity could be implemented after a period of existential disruption and turmoil. In the UK, pub culture is a constitutive part of one's social life. Fostering a regeneration of pub culture—encouraging the population to dine out and share alcoholic beverages with loved ones again—was deemed an appropriate measure to return the country and its social milieu to a pre-pandemic state of affairs (where revelry and merriment were normal features of social life) – an endeavor to re-scaffold the social world for public re-engagement and the revitalization of socioeconomic activities.

When the pillars of belongingness come under threat, such as in the case of the pandemic, common themes emerge in the way we respond. For instance, we turn to our loved ones for moral support. This is where the strength of our social bonds is put to the test. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, we were all severely tested in this regard, revealing how we as individuals, communities, societies, and nations responded to an unforeseen and confounding series of events when that which we universally hold dear and take for granted (such as our social connections) come apart or evaporate altogether. When the need to belong becomes an existential imperative—you need trusted others to help you through tough times—the degree of success in maintaining social connections is often very much context dependent and socioculturally nuanced, as case studies in the following section reveal.

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[32] URL = <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-eat-out-to-help-out-scheme-screening-equality-impact-assessment/coronavirus-eat-out-to-help-out-scheme>

[33] URL = <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67658106 - 'Eat Out to Help Out: What was the impact of the scheme?'>

3.3 How the *Hikikomori*, *Honjok*, and *Shamate* Respond to Social Disconnection, Stigmatization, and Loneliness: A Review of Case Studies in Confucian Cultures

Thus far, we have examined the phenomena of sociality and nonsociality from a broadly Western perspective. In the Western philosophical tradition of individualism, the idea that you can *go it alone* (i.e.., live a solitary, self-determined life) is glorified in ways that are unique to this Western cultural context. Similarly, the stigmatization of loneliness in Western societies has its culturally distinct qualities; for example, someone who keeps to himself may be considered a hermit, a recluse, or an eccentric, rather than a weirdo, freak, or loser. In certain non-Western societies, where *shame* is a core component of the social mores and cultural norms, those who struggle to fit in and who are judged for being loners respond in a variety of unique ways.

With the aforementioned considerations in mind, this section introduces socioculturally nuanced examples of responses and adaptations to experiences of loneliness and lack of social connection within East Asian societal contexts. These case studies present unique perspectives on loneliness, alienation, and isolation from distinctly collectivistic perspectives, showcasing how youth in parts of East Asia deal with the lack/loss of a sense of belonging. In Japan, socially disconnected and awkward (mostly male) youth—*hikikomori*—withdraw from society in an extreme manner, essentially locking themselves away for protracted periods of time (months, years, and sometimes even decades). The *hikikomori* often feel ashamed of their inability to cope with the outside world, retreating into the cocoon that is the comfort and solace of their own room, until such time that they feel ready to face the outside world again.

In China, youth from rural regions who migrate to cities for better work opportunities face ostracism and stigmatization from locals who look down on them. For rural youth who have resettled in the Guangdong region for better job opportunities and life prospects, they often find themselves ostracized, while dealing with feelings isolation and displacement (from their hometowns and

villages of origin). As a result, many resort to moral support in the company of one another. Over time, this collective of foreign workers developed their own subculture—*shamate*—around flamboyant fashion choices in ostentatious displays of rebellion, to reclaim and reassert their sense of identity in an unbelonging environment and pushes them away in *unpersoning* ways.

In South Korea, pressures to conform to society's expectations force some youth to embrace a more solitary way of life, a phenomenon called *honjok* (tribe of one). For activities normally enjoyed with friends (e.g., dining out, going to the movies, attending festivals, etc.), the *honjok* learn to enjoy them alone. For the *honjok*, their response is characteristic of neither withdrawal nor rebellion, but rather *reimagination*: taking the power back from society and its judgmental ways by redefining being alone as something to be proud of and joyful about, rather than something to be ashamed and miserable about.

Despite the different approaches to overcoming the lack/loss of a sense of belonging taken by the *hikikomori*, the *shamate*, and the *honjok* respectively, the common thread running through these case studies is how a breakdown (lack or loss) of belongingness elicits corrective actions appropriate for the given context and environment. By examining these case studies, we gain new insights on how lonely individuals in certain non-Western cultures overcome their social disconnection. Furthermore, surveying the variety of responses to situations where belongingness breaks down enhances our understanding of the complexity of human behavior when existential needs are threatened.

3.3.1 Hikikomori: Acute Social Withdrawal Among Japanese Youth

Concepts of belongingness and loneliness are often culturally nuanced. Surveying the various cultural contexts in which these concepts are understood beyond the realm of the Western philosophical canon reveals interesting and valuable insights into different forms of experientiality of the social world in various cultural contexts. In Japan, loneliness is considered a social problem of national concern – particularly since the 1990s (Saitō 2013/1998). This phenomenon of extreme social withdrawal, affecting mostly young Japanese men, came to be known as *hikikomori*, meaning "pulling inward" and being confined. In the face of immense sociocultural expectations to amount to

something in life, many young Japanese men succumb to the pressure by withdrawing from society and retreating into their rooms, isolating themselves from the rest of society. This avoidant behavior of confining oneself indoors and shunning physical contact may last for several months; and in more extreme cases, lasting several years and even decades.

Research by Sekimizu (2022) on experiences of isolation and family dependency amongst Japanese youth, based on interviews with subjects assessed as *hikikomori*, and drawing inspiration from Arendt's work on appearances, found that these individuals share "a strong sense of self-denial because of maladjustment to the life course expected by others", and respond positively to others who share their experiences of reality and accept their experiences as valid (Sekimizu 2022: 12-13). *Hikikomori* commonly struggle with the right words to enunciate their experiences; and unless others can relate on their level, they are beset with ambivalence and regard their life as a "shadowy" existence (ibid.). Sekimizu adds that "[t]he hikikomori experience is a dynamic process of coming to know the nature of oneself, of accepting who and what one is, and determining how to balance who and what one is with the expectations of others" (Sekimizu 2022: 14). Sekimizu further noted that there is currently no medical consensus on how the phenomenon ought to be managed: the *hikikomori* thus need to be dealt with on a case-per-case basis.

Despite our understanding of the *hikikomori* remaining nascent, common behavioral patterns have been observed; for instance, emergence from the confines of their bedrooms only for bare necessities and routines (such as bathroom use, picking up takeaway meals, etc.), stockpiling their bedrooms with snacks and drinks for convenience (and minimal interference with online gaming schedules), and so forth. The *hikikomori* limit their social interactions to the virtual world, which they find manageable on their own terms. (For example, if an interaction becomes awkward, one can always switch off one's device – as opposed to making an additionally awkward exit from a physical setting, in which case the embarrassment lingers longer.) Their parents support them financially, even in late adulthood (some *hikikomori* are now in their fifties, with their parents being in their eighties, this dynamic being known as the

"80/50 problem"[34]), a sociocultural practice that would be unfamiliar to those beyond the context of Confucian (and indeed other Asian) societies.

A young person, within Japanese culture, who is unable to cope with regular life like everyone else, is considered a failure of sorts – reflective of his parents' poor parenting skills, bringing shame upon the entire family, and hence obligating the parents for the upkeep of their seemingly maladaptive and dysfunctional child, until such time he can face the outside world again. Just as one ought to avoid washing their dirty linen in public, a household ought to keep its problematic family member(s) indoors, to avoid bringing further shame to the household name. Note how this practice is unfamiliar in Western cultural contexts and therefore illuminating to scrutinize. The *hikikomori* phenomenon is interesting for belongingness research in revealing how social withdrawal within the Japanese cultural context *makes sense* as a form of family-belongingness (as a subset of group-belongingness), where basic existential needs are satisfied through reliance on one's family. By withdrawing from the outside world and confining themselves to their family home, the *hikikomori* enjoy access to the pillars of belongingness that would otherwise be missing if left in the lurch, compelled to fend for themselves in the outside world.

What pillars of belongingness come under threat for the *hikikomori*, and how effectively do their responses deal with these threats? Given that the *hikikomori* have chosen a life of social withdrawal, having failed in attempts at a regular life as a functioning member of society, it would appear that they struggle first and foremost with *acceptance*. Due to a combination of societal factors and personal circumstances, the *hikikomori* deem it reasonable to shun conventional social norms by confining themselves indoors, away from the gaze of others, where they feel *safe* in familiar surroundings (one's own room/abode), performing familiar daily routines (e.g., multiplayer online gaming sessions with *familiar* others). Being socially anxious, the *hikikomori* likely have low levels of trust of others; or perhaps they feel that others do not trust them adequately to befriend them. Either way, it appears that they lack the confidence to function normally in society, hence their dependency on—and *trust* in—their parents for their own upkeep (the *hikikomori* do not attend school or go to work).

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[34] URL: <https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/the-8050-problem>

While their reclusive existence confined in their rooms may appear to resemble an unfree life, many *hikikomori* do not seem bothered by these living conditions, perhaps valuing the *freedom* they enjoy from being judged by the outside world. From an observer's perspective, the *hikikomori* mode of being-in-the-world seems incomprehensible and inscrutable. From the perspective of the *hikikomori* themselves, however, social withdrawal coupled with self-imposed solitary confinement is simply a reasonable adaptive response to a world in which they struggle to fit in and make sense of. Their response feels right: they feel *safe* in an environment *familiar* to them, scaffolded for their basic existential needs to be taken care of, shielded from the gaze and judgment of the world, and *free* from stress and worry about *trust* issues and lack of *acceptance*. All in all, social withdrawal, *from their point of view*, works just fine.

What makes the *hikikomori* phenomenon particularly interesting and relevant is the parallels in their lived experiences with those who have undergone pandemic-induced loneliness, or who have otherwise experienced alienation and isolation of some sort. As we begin to make sense of the emergent phenomena of voluntary and involuntary social withdrawal, a study of the *hikikomori* can provide us with clues on the lived experiences of a social outcast. *Hikikomori* is a culture-bound condition of extreme isolation and social withdrawal, first diagnosed in Japan in the late 1990s, but is now observed beyond East Asia as well. This trend of confining oneself at home for prolonged periods was initially observed in Japanese youth who struggled with economic pressures and societal expectations of this period in history: they would retreat into their private spaces (usually their bedrooms) as a way of coping (or perhaps, more accurately, due to their inability to cope) with the outside world. Social anxiety compounds periods of isolation, becoming protracted in more severe cases, often lasting for several years (even decades) on end.

In Japan, social anxiety has a particular cultural nuance known as *Taijin-Kyofu-Sho* (TKS), a culture-bound syndrome where one is anxious due to the discomfort or offence one's appearance or behavior may cause to others (Lim 2013). For an agent with TKS, he is ashamed of his social awkwardness and inadequacy in functioning normally in society. In view of this, perhaps a case can be made that *hikikomori*-like behaviors reflect TKS-like symptoms and characteristics, certainly within the Japanese cultural context – a link that has

thus far attracted little academic scholarship. Beyond the Japanese cultural context, *hikikomori*-like traits and behaviors have been observed in youth around the world (even in the pre-pandemic era; see, for instance, Pozza et al 2019). Individuals who have stepped back from society and public spaces often remain in a state of perpetual social withdrawal and isolation, unable to successfully reintegrate into society. Protracted periods of social isolation have rendered some agents somewhat socially inept. To this end, the *hikikomori* phenomenon, with its "spread" beyond the national/cultural borders of Japan, highlights the appeal of social withdrawal as a legitimate adaptive response to an (increasingly) uncanny world: a viable alternative to other modes of being-in-the-world thus far having proven ineffective in providing certainty and stability.

The *hikikomori* on the more severe end of the spectrum tend to remain isolated from society seemingly indefinitely, choosing this state of affairs as a normalized way of life, despite the fact that many are, arguably speaking, addicted to the world of online gaming (perhaps as a distraction from negative self-thoughts, as a coping mechanism in life more generally, or both). Therapists and psychiatrists, aware of this behavioral tendency in severe cases of the *hikikomori* condition, engage in "use of augmented reality games to draw socially withdrawn youths out of their rooms and into the real world" and "integrat[e] therapeutic gaming with exposure therapy strategies by introducing hikikomori to virtual reality experiences, then shared virtual reality environments, before resocialization into society" (Wong et al 2019: 5). To reach out to the socially withdrawn, it is necessary to connect with them on terms they relate to and are responsive to. The task at hand is no straightforward one, as these individuals experience a more acute and chronic form of loneliness. Accordingly, they are in all likelihood reluctant to participate in the world out there, being well shielded in the confines of their own home where basic existential needs are accessible.

Notwithstanding efforts by medical professionals to better educate the general public about the *hikikomori*, their struggles, and their lived experiences, the *hikikomori* nonetheless remain a stigmatized segment of the Japanese population. Thus, the *hikikomori* phenomenon provides researchers with an important window into how chronic loneliness and isolation can become

psychopathologically significant. To this end, Stip et al (2016) provide us with the following diagnosis of the *hikikomori* phenomenon:

> Hikikomori has been defined by a Japanese expert group as having the following characteristics: (1) spending most of the time at home; (2) no interest in going to school or working; (3) persistence of withdrawal for more than 6 months; (4) exclusion of schizophrenia, mental retardation, and bipolar disorder; and (5) exclusion of those who maintain personal relationships (e.g., friendships). Other criteria are more controversial. These include the inclusion or exclusion of psychiatric comorbidity (primary versus secondary hikikomori), duration of social withdrawal, and the presence or absence of subjective distress and functional impairment. (Stip et al 2016: 2)

The *hikikomori* phenomenon poses several challenges to researchers and therapists alike, not least owing to "the lack of clear definition of the syndrome", let alone a proper diagnosis for it (Stip et al 2016: 3). Moreover, "the resulting social isolation and the shame and guilt of the family, are all barriers to the identification and characterization of these individuals" (ibid.); and owing to these reasons, the afflicted experience long delays in receiving treatment.

Indeed, the *hikikomori* phenomenon poses significant challenges for psychologists and therapists who, for the most part, regard this lifestyle as a maladaptive and antisocial behavioral pattern and therefore an undesirable state of affairs for a patient's long-term mental health. In other words, while interventions are available to coax the *hikikomori* out of their confined spaces, there are two complications in yielding higher success rates in treatment outcomes: (a) lingering stigma exhibited by medical professionals contiguous with the kind imposed on the *hikikomori* by Japanese society at large, and (b) the unwillingness of the *hikikomori* themselves to alter their life trajectory. With regard to the latter complication, the *hikikomori* see no reason to change tack: their access to the pillars of belongingness, while restricted to the comforts and confines of their family home, and despite being minimal in relation to more conventional forms of belongingness, nonetheless suffice *for them* and *on their terms*. Besides, why should they change for the sake of others, if they themselves are content with their lot in life? There are no easy answers to such considerations – but we ought to ask these questions anyway.

Based on the foregoing analysis, we can conclude that while social withdrawal is *generally* not a long-term solution to the problems of loneliness, alienation, isolation, and so forth, the phenomenon of the *hikikomori* well

exemplifies a reasonable adaptive response providing the lonely and isolated with a viable lifeline to basic existential needs. Thus, even in cases of severe forms of loneliness, social withdrawal—on the balance of probabilities—could well be the *least worst* option available, at least for the foreseeable future. Indeed, social withdrawal may well be a sustainable strategy to buy oneself time (however long one needs) while one rebuilds one's sense of connection with the social world *through virtual means first* (a point raised and further explored in the next section on virtual belongingness as a surrogate for lack of offline social connection and offline belongingness).

The *hikikomori* phenomenon demonstrates how even the chronically withdrawn have unmet social needs (e.g., companionship, romance, etc.), like other lonely, isolated, and social anxious agents – needs which require some other means of fulfilment, hence one's reorientation to the virtual world (e.g., through chat rooms and online gaming) for a sense of togetherness and therapeutic relief when loneliness becomes overbearing. In the absence of viable alternative ways to connect and reconnect with the outside world, reconstructing a sense of belonging within the parameters of one's family home may well suit certain agents just fine, until such time they feel ready to face mainstream society again and thereby reintegrate into normal everyday life.

3.3.2 Shamate: Southern China's Ridiculed, Rebellious, Rural Youth

The pressure to amount to something in life weighs heavily on many agents of different backgrounds. In the previous subsection, we examined an example from Japan of individuals who retreat from the world and rely on their immediate family (usually their parents) for sustenance, unable to fulfil the usual societal expectations of males their age (namely, going to university, having a job, starting a family, and so forth). In other cases, financial considerations and career decisions necessitate relocation to another city or country altogether. Choosing a new environment to build a new life for oneself raises questions concerning right fit (i.e., which place is most conducive for having one's existential needs fulfilled). In the case of migrants, expats, and digital nomads, the pressure to integrate varies depending on one's life circumstances. For a digital nomad, whose life is more transient, perhaps she can adapt more

seamlessly to ever-changing situations and environments; finding a new set of friends becomes a life skill one fine-tunes over time. For expats and migrants, belongingness likely matters to a greater extent, since they are committing themselves to forging a new life in a foreign land. Their degree of success is contingent on several factors – a crucial one being the attitudes of locals toward foreigners, outsiders, and strangers in mediating one's degree of integration.

The level of acceptance of newcomers has certainly put belongingness to the test for a community known as the *shamate* (a Chinese transliteration of the word "smart"), a subculture originating in the city of Dongguan in the Southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Being one of China's fastest growing provinces, Guangdong attracts workers from various provinces – notably, the Yunnan province in Southwest China,[35] as well as from other villages and towns whose residents seek better career prospects for themselves and life opportunities for their families. Many workers who leave their towns and villages are youth who are high-school dropouts in these rural areas, attracted to the idea of big city life and escaping from a life of poverty.[36] *Shamate* is a subculture that started in 2009, and appeals to migrant factory workers who lack a sense of belonging, yearning for a way to express themselves. At the peak of its popularity, the *shamate* community numbered around 20,000.[37] With limited entertainment options and a mundane existence, adherents of the *shamate* community sought novel ways to be free spirits. They feel abandoned and neglected by society generally, hence the extravagant hairstyles to get public attention (and partly to signal other *shamate* to join them), allowing them to assert and showcase their unique sense of identity.

The *shamate* aesthetic borrows visual cues from punk, glam rock, and cyberpunk subcultures, with respect to elaborate, creative, and outlandish multicolored hairstyles.[38] Adherents of the *shamate* subculture take great care and pride in their self-image, claiming that it provides them a sense of belonging and empowerment. Luo Fuxing, widely credited as the founder of the *shamate*

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[35] URL = <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202011/1206863.shtml>

[36] URL = <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1206813.shtml>

[37] URL = <https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Shamate>

[38] Examples of the shamate aesthetic can be viewed here: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kevintang/meet-shamate-chinas-most-hated-subculture.

movement, makes the following observation of the spiky, brightly-dyed, punk-like hairstyles frequently sported by *shamate* devotees:

> "It feels like you're living in a cage. You don't know what's outside, you don't know anything. So you made yourself hard and sharp, like a porcupine."[39]

From the *shamate* point of view, their easily discernible spiky hairdos symbolize and signify their struggle against the harsh realities of being ostracized by the wider community, therefore constituting a cheeky and irreverent adaptive response (essentially a "fuck-you", adorned with pretty fluorescent colors) to those who disown and discredit them. The local populace, however, considers the *shamate* lifestyle and fashion sense vulgar and tasteless, in part attributable to their condescension toward those at the bottom rungs of society possessing the requisite intelligence/education to create tasteful art. Against the backdrop of such hostility, the *shamate* movement was borne out of loneliness, social isolation, and depression, as experienced by second generation youth migrant workers looking for a sense of purpose and connection is a city foreign to them. In these cities, migrant workers often struggle with a sense of belonging generally, being despised for their status as poor village people. Failing to integrate in the wider context of the city, migrant workers like the *shamate* have resorted to unique and novel ways to adapt to hostile new environments.

The *shamate* community—a region-specific development stemming from disaffected rural working-class youth, mostly hailing from the late Millennial and early Gen-Z generations—constitutes a subculture borne out of loneliness, alienation, and unbelongingness. Like the *hikikomori*, the *shamate* have resorted to connecting with like-minded others in virtual spaces, when in-person interactions have failed to bear fruit. However, unlike the *hikikomori*, the *shamate* are generally prosocial, often congregating in public spaces like shopping malls and local parks to showcase their dance moves as a way of fostering bonds with the wider yet tightknit *shamate* community, where new members are vetted before being welcomed as "family members". In formulating their unique look, the *shamate* take cues from the *visual kei* subculture in Japan, the *emo* subculture in America, and the *glam rock* subcultures of Europe. For the *shamate*, their hairstyles and dress sense

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[39] URL = < https://radii.co/article/shamate-documentary >

characterize their subversive attitudes toward the snobbery and apathy of urbanities, oblivious and indifferent to their plight. Harsh and oftentimes inhumane labor conditions became a catalyst for this countercultural movement, where pent-up frustrations against the system would be channelled toward artistic expression. In this sense, we can characterize the rise of the *shamate* movement as a reasonable and even positive response to a harsh environment.

Rejected and cast out from mainstream society, the *shamate* are otherwise lonely (but *not antisocial*) individuals who find solace and solidarity in the company of fellow *shamate* adherents. Their belongingness lasts as long as they remain domiciled in the foreign city in which they have chosen to ply their trade to earn a respectable living. Furthermore, their identity is forged as a statement of rebellion and defiance against an establishment that treats them as second-class citizens. Through their deliberately provocative dress sense, the *shamate* make their unique sense of identity-belongingness known to themselves and to others. In essence, the *shamate* are society's rejects who channel their frustrations with the mainstream in *creative rather than toxic ways* – in doing so, enacting their own sense of belonging that makes sense to them.

What pillars of belongingness come under threat for the *shamate*, and how effectively do their responses deal with these threats? Similarly to the *hikikomori*, the *shamate* struggle with *acceptance*, seeing as some locals have prejudiced attitudes about rural folk being a menace who bringing uncivilized ways with them. Integrating to city life proves challenging, being in *unfamiliar* surroundings. It is difficult to meet *trusted* others who have your back in an environment where your presence is not met with great enthusiasm. Thus, the *shamate* find solace through camaraderie and comradery with fellow *shamate*, likewise eager to parade their sense of identity in public spaces. The *shamate style* is deliberately eye-catching and provocative, designed to provoke a reaction from disapproving locals. In turn, the ridicule and shunning from locals causes the *shamate* to keep to themselves, where they feel *safe* and understood in the company of trusted and similarly affected others, reinforcing a sense of disconnectedness from the wider social scene. In the company of fellow *shamate*, where one can be *free* to be oneself, exclusionary behaviors and attitudes from the wider populace become tolerable and digestible.

The *shamate* community makes for an interesting case study on how unbelongingness in a wider context generates a rather niche and siloed form of belongingness as an adaptive response to a hostile and uncompromising environment. As outcasts, facing limited social and employment opportunities and various other possibilities for upward mobility, the *shamate* remain unfazed. Fundamentally aware that locals are hostile to—and as such, do not accept and recognize—their presence in the city, the *shamate* redirect their socialization endeavors toward fostering a sense of in-group belongingness among themselves (fellow *shamate*), where they are free to express (and be) themselves. As I have outlined above, this takes the form of rebelliousness through flamboyance in fashion: a way of connecting with other disaffected and ostracized youth, in an effort to reassert their sense of belonging, within a city that rejects them and looks down on them. In the company of other *shamate*, they feel less lonely and disconnected from the harsh realities of their existence. Accordingly, freedom to express their identity constitutes the basis of the *shamate*'s efforts to adapt to the unwanted social impositions of wider society encountered as an uncanny, alien(ating), and restrictive environment.

It remains to be seen whether the *shamate* community will continue to survive, being frowned upon by the majority of Chinese society, and with the original devotees of this movement having grown up and started families. Thus, some liken the *shamate* to similar subcultures like punk, goth, and emo which tend to attract disaffected youth who are unsure of who they are and what they want to be when they grow up. The *shamate* phenomenon attracts a similar demographic to the *hikikomori* and the *honjok* (the matter meaning “tribe of one”, a South Korean phenomenon discussed in the following subsection), whose adherents likewise tend to be youth in their teens and twenties. However, unlike the *hikikomori* and the *honjok*, the *shamate* phenomenon had already begun waning as of the mid-2010s, largely due to wider society's unwavering refusal to accept and recognize this subculture, but also in part because the *shamate* themselves simply outgrew the subculture as they became older and eventually moved back to their respective hometowns or otherwise integrated into mainstream society. Think of the goth kid at high school who was constantly mocked and heckled by his peers and had no friends, written off by his teachers as a maladaptive loser or lost soul unlikely to

amount to anything in life, who later became a regular functioning member of society like everyone else. The emergence of the *shamate* subculture highlights a form of unbelongingness that was borne out of temporary yet exigent circumstances – being compelled by financial and other factors to earn a means of living in a city whose cultural norms and social mores are alien to those which one is acquainted with. Despite this community receding over time, the *shamate* dynamic nonetheless exemplifies *the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity*, where the disaffected, however maligned they may be, nonetheless find a way to access existential goods seemingly out of reach.

3.3.3 Honjok: Tribes of One among South Korean Youth

Loneliness has become increasingly prevalent in South Korea since the turn of the last century, whereby it could be argued that a version of the *hikikomori* phenomenon has taken a foothold in South Korea. South Koreans shares similar cultural values, traits, and norms with the Japanese—in particular, Confucian traditions such as accordance of primacy to the group over the individual—providing the necessary cultural framework and backdrop for a phenomenon like *hikikomori* to arise. Many South Korean youth of the same generation faced similar existential threats as Japanese youth of the 1990s did, struggling to adjust to a changing world: rising living costs, the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis which devastated the economies of East Asia and Southeast Asia, an increasingly interconnected and globalized world stage, making sense of the internet "revolution", and so forth.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of a novel social phenomenon in South Korean known as "untact",[40] a neologism (comprising a portmanteau of "un-" and "contact") coined by South Korean researchers, to provide a theoretical framework for describing a lifestyle choice of voluntary withdrawal from undesirable social contact, along with increased reliance on digital technologies and virtual spaces. Untact behavior implicates a certain behavioral dynamic of disillusionment with and disengagement from more conventional forms of social interaction, reflecting a social phenomenon of

[40] URL = <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200803-south-korea-contact-free-untact-society-after-coronavirus>

social withdrawal first observed and studied within the sociocultural context of South Korea, spreading to other parts of the globe, particularly in light of the pandemic (Ghorbanzadeh & Aghamohammadi 2021; Lee 2021; Lee & Lee 2020). In South Korea, the untact phenomenon coincided with the spread of social media and smart technologies, where demand for social needs being met without traditional modes of interaction increased as people's lives became busier and more complex. For some, modern technologies provide convenient ways to reach out to others and stay in touch with them, additionally offering new possibilities to increase one's social capital, hence enhancing one's social life. For others, modern technologies mean novel ways of *filtering out undesirable social contact* and novel pathways for *keeping one's distance*. Think of how much more convenient and (relatedly) how much less awkward it is to cancel an appointment or skip a social event simply with a text message rather than doing so via a telephone call or (worse) in person, face-to-face.

Modern technologies can thus be wielded as a double-edged sword, either by enhancing one's participation in the social world or limiting one's contact through it. With respect to the pandemic period and the associated seemingly endless stretches of social isolation, involuntary disengagement from physical interactions gradually evolved into *voluntary dissociation* in certain cases. Now, it should be noted that "due to the wide application of information advanced technology in commercial activities, the "untact" buying behavior of the public has already shown an increasing trend before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak" (Zhao 2022: 1). Nevertheless, it remains observable that "intolerance of uncertainty is a critical internal personality difference variable that inevitably affects individuals' "untact" buying behavior during COVID-19 pandemic" (Zhao 2022: 2). After all, "with the ultimate goal to eliminate uncertainties, individuals with a high level of intolerance of uncertainty have excessive planning and preparation behavioral intention for negative risks or threats" (Zhao 2022: 2). Some agents, reluctant to engage in conventional forms of interaction, but who are nonetheless amenable to remaining tethered to a world of sociality, have sought alternative means of accessing the existential goods necessary for preserving their way of life.

The emergence of the untact phenomenon coincided with the rise of what later became known as the *honjok* subculture, which celebrates

aloneness/solitude and self-sufficiency/reliance. *Honjok* adherents tend to be youth who rebel and push back against local social conventions that traditionally elevate the collective over the individual and frown upon the "go it alone" approach more ubiquitous and prevalent in Western societies. The term "*honjok*" became popularized in 2017,[41] indicating that this is a rather nascent social phenomenon and therefore warranting further analysis. The literal translation of *honjok* is "tribe of one" ("hon" meaning "one", "alone", "solitary", and "by myself"; and "jok" meaning "tribe"), and this conceptualization of the solitary way of life is rather apt and profound: it conveys the idea that even though you are by yourself, it feels as though you are not. Put differently, it means that you do not need support or validation from others to feel complete. *Honjok* is, in a sense, an empowering reimagination of what it is like to be by yourself and yet feel satiated in ways which previously required social contact.

Having identified core features of the *honjok* phenomenon, we have reason to classify it as a form of solitude: a way of life characterized not just by non-reliance on the social world for attainment of one's existential needs, but also a desire to seek personal fulfilment through individual and individuated life pursuits. The appeal of the *honjok* lifestyle can be found in the encouragement and promotion of different ways of thinking about what it means to be happy and successful in life – in defiance of traditional sociocultural norms and expectations of wider South Korean society. Within the South Korean cultural context, *honjok* has developed into a philosophy of self-help and self-determination for living and thriving in a world obsessed with social status, fame, and attention: a way of being-in-the-world—going against the grain and swimming upstream—where the sociocultural environment is conventionally encountered as unrelatable, unforgiving, and unbelonging to them.

What pillars of belongingness come under threat for the *honjok*, and how effectively do their responses deal with these threats? Those who are attracted to the *honjok* mindset consider standard norms and expectations in South Korean society too restrictive and stifling, hence a threat to personal *freedom* and expression. The *honjok* tend to resent conformity and peer pressure, preferring to assert their own unique sense of individuality. While the *honjok*

[41] URL = <https://gildaflint.medium.com/the-rise-of-the-honjok-362e09aca568>

may not suffer the same stigmatization as the *hikikomori* and the *shamate*, they are nonetheless viewed with a degree of both intrigue and apprehension, as the idea that you can forge your own path in life sans strong social ties is still an alien concept in South Korean culture. In other words, the *honjok* lifestyle is not fully recognized or *accepted* by the wider population and considered an *aberration*. Thus, it could be said that the *honjok* are not very *trusting* of the "average joe", nor are they necessarily trusted highly either. After all, they keep to themselves, do things by themselves, and seem to enjoy their own company – again, this is considered unusual behavior from a traditionalist point of view.

The *honjok* generally do not attract vilification or threats from members of the public, so their *safety* is not exactly in any kind of immediate jeopardy. While the lifestyle choices of the *honjok* are regarded as novel and even bewildering (a life without friends or social activities is unfathomable in the eyes of many), they nonetheless blend in with the rest of society (unlike, say, the *shamate*, with their deliberately provocative look, or the *hikikomori*, who shy away from the public eye). Put differently, a lone wolf is not stigmatized or condescended nearly as frequently or as extensively as a freak with weird hair (i.e., a caricature of the *shamate*) or a recluse/hermit/loner (i.e., a caricature of the *hikikomori*) is. That being said, a life of solitude in a deeply collectivistic society with strong traditions around roles and expectations of young adults (e.g., women being married by a certain age, men being breadwinners and holding respectable jobs, etc.) remains *unfamiliar* territory – both for adherents and observers alike of the *honjok* way of life.

For the *honjok*, doing things differently is exactly what makes the solo life journey so invigorating and inspiring. For researchers, the *honjok* phenomenon is a rich treasure trove: there is much to be uncovered in how the unbelonging and nonbelonging in certain non-Western societies orientate themselves toward a life of solitude as a reasonable and effective adaptive response to a world of unrelatable norms and expectations. Interestingly, despite the fact that South Korea and Japan share similar cultural values, shame does not seem to have the same effect on nonconformist and socially anxious South Korean youth as it does on nonconformist and socially anxious Japanese youth – a discrepancy that can perhaps be explained by the TKS variant of social anxiety in Japanese society. This nuance further demonstrates the importance of mapping out the

variety of responses to unbelongingness across the global sociocultural landscape for a more robust picture of the phenomenon of belongingness as an integral part of the human experience.

The *honjok* lifestyle provides us with a glimpse into a uniquely South Korean sociocultural phenomenon, where socially disconnected youth reinvent *what it means to be on your own* as a positive/beneficial rather than negative/detrimental orientation to/in the world, dispensing with the pejorative connotations commonly associated with being-on-your-own. South Korea has seen a rise in single-person households since the 1990s, largely due to economic reforms, providing the necessary backdrop for the going-it-alone ethos of the *honjok* mindset to take root and germinate. Thus, in the absence of social ties, rather than viewing this as "not having friends", the *honjok* reclaim and redefine this social status as "not *needing* friends" for a rich and fulfilling life. The *honjok* attitude and disposition thus constitutes a re-encountering of the social world—an approach prioritizing nonsociality (though not unsociality or antisociality) over sociality—within a societal framework already pre-scaffolded with certain norms, values, and customs dictating that having no friends makes you a loner, and where being a loner is deemed both shameful and undesirable.

To this end, the *honjok* identity is a bold embodied statement to the world that "I may be alone, but I am hardly a loner or a loser". Immersing oneself in activities (such as dining out, shopping, going to the movies, etc., usually experienced with others) alone, rather than being stigmatizing, is redefined by the *honjok* as appealing and refreshing. Sure, people usually seek the company of others in part as moral support when dealing with life's fragilities. However, if an agent can access the necessary strength within to function well in the social world non-socially, and still attain the necessary existential goods she requires, it certainly stands to reason that *belongingness to oneself*, under the right circumstances, is essentially all she needs to propel her through life's challenges. Hence, in this regard, the *honjok* approach to being-in-the-world demonstrates how one can live a contented and fulfilling life,[42] in defiance of accepted norms, *without sacrificing one's self-worth at the altar of conformity*.

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[42] For a perspective from the realm of self-help psychology on how the *honjok* philosophy inculcates in us an appreciation of moments of solitude and thus "helps us transform our self-isolation into a new lifestyle", see Lazzaris & An (2023).

3.3.4 Final Thoughts on Culture-Specific Responses to Loneliness in selected East Asian Contexts

In this chapter, I have provided three examples of social disconnection in non-Western (namely, East Asian) cultural contexts—*hikikomori* in Japan, *shamate* in China, and *honjok* in South Korea—and analyze how the socially disconnected have responded and adapted to these situations respectively. This analysis provides an interesting and illuminating contrast to how loneliness is experienced, problematized, and addressed in the more individualistic Western World. All three social phenomena examined in this section have arisen in Confucian cultures and societies where the group is often accorded primacy over the individual, *in the face of* these onerous challenges no less, reflecting a generational shift in attitudes toward being alone. Note how the *hikikomori*, *shamate*, and *honjok* phenomena are all severally implicated in various adaptive responses of youth across similarly enculturated yet socially distinct and nuanced societies of a particular region of the globe, where certain shared sociocultural norms and expectations impose themselves in ways that compel the youth of these respective contexts to encounter the world differently.

Despite the fact that each social phenomenon produces different outcomes—with (a) the *hikikomori* being characterized by *avoidance* of social contact, where loneliness in the real world is replaced or supplanted with connection in the virtual world, (b) the *shamate* being characterized by *alternative* forms of social contact, where feelings of being out of place somewhere alien and alienating are assuaged by socializing with fellow outcasts, and (c) the *honjok* being characterized by *ambivalence* toward social contact, where being solo is embraced as a positive outlook on, and attitude to, the world—all three phenomena are nonetheless borne from the same impetus: to overcome a lack/loss of group-belongingness in a wider context as well as an inability to seemingly fit in seamlessly so, by adopting new adaptive ways of responding to and existing in an uncanny, unwelcoming, and unrelatable world.

Indeed, the *hikikomori*, the *shamate*, and the *honjok* phenomena can be interpreted as varying adaptive responses, not just to the pain of loneliness, but to the unpalatability of conforming to the social mores and sociocultural norms

of wherever they are domiciled. In this latter respect, we can frame these three phenomena as various forms of *defiance*. The *hikikomori* double-down on their social withdrawal, subsisting with family-belongingness for their basic existential needs to be met, in defiance of scorn and ridicule from members of the general public. The *shamate* adopt their own unique fashion sense, considered controversial and confronting for the socially conservative standards of Chinese culture, in so doing creating their own subculture to belong to, as a form of defiance against the mainstream of their adoptive city who reject them as uncultured delinquents and socially inferior outsiders. The *honjok* dare to find comfort and joy in solo activities, thus creating a sense of belonging to oneself (one's own tribe of one to belong to), in defiance of sociocultural norms in a society that prioritizes considerations of the greater good over the needs and desires of the individual and frowns upon solitary lifestyles as self-indulgent.

For the *hikikomori*, the *shamate*, and the *honjok*, their respective versions of belongingness may well be considered *unconventional*—in a general sense, and certainly through a Western sociocultural and normative lens—but nonetheless remain valid and reasonable responses to their respective sociocultural environments experienced as uncanny, unedifying, and unbelonging. Having surveyed a variety of unconventional adaptive responses to breakdowns in social disconnection, let us now shift our attention to more conventional means of re-tethering oneself to the social world.

3.4 Belongingness in Virtual Worlds

From time to time, belongingness is put to the test, calling into question the robustness of the pillars propping up one's homelike existence. Like all tests, failures are bound to occur. As such, unbelongingness—when revealed—is a call to action. In the previous section, I examined the experiences of the socially disconnected in a culturally different region of the world (namely, East Asia) where the respective societies in China, Japan, and South Korea, steeped in Confucian traditions and collectivist values, compel the lonely, isolated, and

socially anxious to respond in certain ways that make sense to them (even if not to others) as they push back on the expectations of society imposed on them. Being lonely or socially disconnected in these societies takes on culturally nuanced dimensions. These agents—mostly youth—find themselves in vulnerable positions, having unmet existential needs due to lack/loss of belongingness. As a result of the pillars of belongingness being missing, they have resorted to different methods of dealing with their loneliness. In the case of the *hikikomori*, they find solace through extreme social withdrawal from a world they cease to identify with, limiting their social contact to online modes of interaction (e.g., chat rooms, online gaming, etc.). In the case of the *shamate*, they find solace with relatable others whom society has likewise shunned (e.g., other folk from rural regions treated as outcasts by urban residents), and largely keep to themselves (their own community members). In the case of the *honjok*, they find solace in solo activities (e.g., dining alone, going to the movies by oneself, solo sojourns in nature, and so forth). These case studies reveal contextually appropriate responses to various forms of unbelongingness, leading to novel recourses to accessing one's existential needs.

When belongingness breaks down, such that the offline world fails to provide adequate access to social interactions, the online world becomes an attractive alternative medium in retaining opportunities for sociality. The online world is not without its detractors, however. For one, Turkle (2017/2011) is particularly scathing of the impact of virtual forms of connectivity. She opines:

> "Today's adolescents have no less need than those of previous generations to learn empathic skills, to think about their values and identity, and to manage and express feelings. They need time to discover themselves, time to think. But technology, put in the service of always-on communication and telegraphic speed and brevity, has changed the rules of engagement with all of this. When is downtime, when is stillness? The text-driven world of rapid response does not make self-reflection impossible but does little to cultivate it. When interchanges are reformatted for the small screen and reduced to the emotional shorthand of emoticons, there are necessary simplifications." (Turkle 2017/2011: 226)

The skepticism of digital communication expressed here taps into a deeper concern about the potential trivialization of social interactions, reducing them to bleeps and pings on our smartphones. Notwithstanding valid criticisms of certain modern styles of communication and associated habits—think, for

instance, of all the times your friends have cancelled appointments with you at the last minute via text messages, without so much as a convincing explanation or excuse—it is unnecessary to take such a techno-pessimistic view regarding the online world and virtual technologies as a whole, especially given the enablement and empowerment potentialities to be unlocked in seeking online affordances for reconnection to the realms of sociality. With the benefit of hindsight, given that we now live in a post-pandemic era, perhaps Turkle may wish to reflect on how digital technologies have allowed us to keep in touch with loved ones during an unprecedented period of upheaval in our lives.

There is another concern worth raising here: the problematic use of digital technologies—which may be described as various forms of misuse, overuse, and abuse—giving rise to exacerbation rather than attenuation of loneliness, the latter of which being one of the original motivations for immersion in the online world for the socially disconnected. To make sense of this problem in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which digital technologies operated as lifelines for the lonely and isolated, let us borrow Candiotto's (2022) conceptual framework of extended loneliness, defined as an "existential feeling" in a Ratcliffian sense (Candiotto 2022: 8-9) of finding oneself in the world and experiencing the possibilities it affords. Extended loneliness, by this definition, amounts to a "complex affective experience of both lacking and longing for meaningful relationships while being connected to many people online", reflecting "the struggles of an isolated person during a lockdown trying to fulfil the need for belonging (e.g. fighting the feeling of loneliness) by means of digital technology" (Candiotto 2022: 1-2). This need to belong and longing for connection can sometimes be overwhelming, especially when "a lack of fulfilling empathic relationships" eventually leads to "hyperconnectivity", where "the agent realises most clearly how her constant and sometimes exhausting search for connection does not fill her emotional void" (Candiotto 2022: 6, 8). Ultimately, "hyperconnectivity amplifies loneliness because it draws us into constant engagement with relationships that are inherently unfulfilling" (Candiotto 2022: 2), resulting in a lingering and demoralizing sense of dissatisfaction and *weltschmerz*. There is certainly a case to be made that misuse, overuse, and abuse of virtual communications (e.g., using social media for trolling purposes) can generate

malignant effects on one's mind and mood. Perhaps the lesson here is that mindful, discerning, and purposeful immersion in the online world can, under the right conditions, produce the positive directed effects (e.g., reducing one's loneliness and social anxiety) that one seeks and needs.

In this chapter's final section, the notion of online (aka "virtual") belongingness is placed under a lens. I investigate the idea that interpersonal interactions engendering a sense of belonging can also be found through virtual modes of interaction – as a means to cope with social anxiety, depression, isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Online belongingness and the various forms of virtual interactions that arise may be especially affectively significant for those who do not belong, given that it affords opportunities for the socially disconnected to access forms of sociality they could not otherwise do so in physical, real-life settings. Similarly to the *hikikomori*, agents who seek a sense of belonging in online spaces can be described as engaging in a reimagining of what it means to stay tethered to the outside world beyond the confines of one's living quarters. It may well be the case that virtual worlds provide the necessary affordances for meaningful social interactions otherwise missing offline.

3.4.1 The Allure of Virtual Worlds

The virtual world provides avenues for retreat when the pillars of belongingness begin to collapse. Breakdown in belongingness can be framed in terms of erosion of social certainty. Social certainty, according to Roberts and Osler (2024), is "a tacit, unreflective, and skilled sense of what is possible in the interpersonal domain", a kind of certainty which "underwrites and sustains our immersion in the social world [and] is fundamental to our sense of sharing this space with other human beings" (Roberts & Osler 2024: 51). When an agent's immersion in the world is called into question, casting doubt on her ability to activate the right affordances and access the right opportunities, she is no longer poised to act and react non-reflectively. Disruption to her flow of life ensues, disturbing her peace of mind. Unsurety emerges in the form of a sense of foreboding about future interactions with the world – what Roberts and Osler refer to as social doubt: "hesitation about one's social fluency in a particular interpersonal encounter" coupled with "persistent doubt about one's social

abilities generally" (Roberts & Osler 2024: 55). Habits and norms previously taken for granted can no longer be relied upon to seamlessly navigate the social world (as one would have done so before, utilizing said habits and norms).

When social doubt creeps in, the "real" world henceforth appears unaccommodating to the perpetuation of one's way of life. With the relevant affordances no longer available or accessible with the usual ease, the necessary existential needs become unattainable. In modern times, there has been nothing quite like a global health crisis of similar magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of universally thrusting the human population into unfamiliar existential territory rife with social doubt. Many of us found ourselves embedded in situations where we left lonely, isolated, and alienated in ways we had never experienced before. Thus, "while loneliness is a human experience occurring at some point in a human being's lifespan, the isolation and ostracization observed during the pandemic were *excessive*" (Carter & Shienko 2023: 211; emphasis added). Accordingly, as we retreated into our homes and private spaces, the online world became an alternative lifeline for connection to the outside world; in particular, to maintain in touch/contact with our loved ones.

Research on internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic points to "abundant evidence as to the protective effects of social connections and social connectedness on mental health, which seem to operate in a causal manner, including during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Tibber et al 2024: 534). Virtual possibilities for connecting with friends and relatives during this difficult period helped us maintain a grip on the social world. There is already established research that shows "digital technologies can provide a safe arena for people to communicate with others, allowing them to develop and practice social skills without the same perception of social risk they might otherwise experience in offline social interaction" (Harley et al 2018: 157), providing relief for the lonely and alienated. Additionally, "people with high levels of social anxiety only feel less inhibited when using private forms of communication on Facebook because of the potential for control over the audience, and the increased level of privacy and trust with the audience" (Harley et al 2018: 158). Regaining a sense of control over aspects of one's life, so devastatingly disrupted through life-changing events (like the pandemic has caused), is certainly welcome relief for those afflicted with various adverse health conditions.

The online world, it would appear, seems to cater for various communities of needs. Recent research by Gallup and Perihan (2021), on agents with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their potential to build social connections and develop friendships in online gaming environments, found that “young adults with ASD were actively socializing and developing friendships with multiple people in virtual communities such as a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)” (Gallup & Perihan 2021: 32). The authors postulate that “by using a virtual environment, individuals with ASD can interact without the extraneous variables often present in face-to-face interactions that do not have a virtual overlay”, helping overcome “challenges they need to navigate [such as] understanding social cues, reading body language, and responding appropriately and in a timely manner” (Gallup & Perihan 2021: 40). Virtual environments afford a plethora of different ways to interact (e.g., face-to-face video calling, chat boxes, message boards, etc.) augmented for personalized optimization to serve certain needs, as agents with ASD have reportedly found to be personally beneficial. With the offline social landscape altering in ways that are unfamiliar, uncanny, and unnerving, social media platforms became a haven for many beset with various ailments coming to terms with loss of in-person contact.

However, despite the online world providing new avenues for social connection sans in-person opportunities for interaction, “a growing body of evidence from this period suggests a complex picture, with social media playing positive and negative roles in mental depending on a range of factors, including motivations for use, online behaviours, type of app/technology used” (Tibber et al 2024: 533). Similarly, a wide-ranging review of digital technology use among youth during the pandemic years found a small association between higher general levels of social media use and poorer well-being (Marciano et al 2022). Having more time on our hands and reduced avenues for interactions in the offline domain, some of us began spending more time online surveying the lives of others, assessing them in relation to our own lives. Doing so has led to poorer mental health outcomes, with research pointing to social comparisons of this nature being “intimately related to multiple indices of psychopathology and ill-health, including loneliness, anxiety and depression, with links to eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, and body dysmorphia” (Tibber et al 2024: 538).

There are certainly downsides to excessive engagement with social media and unconstructive internet use in general. When we navigate virtual spaces, we are bombarded with a deluge of information and imagery, which can be overwhelming and debilitating. The key here, therefore, is for unbelonging agents to find ways to use online tools in useful and beneficial ways that help them seize the right life-enhancing opportunities, in furtherance of attainment of existential goods sorely lacking (or lost) as collateral damage in times of crisis.

Indeed, opportunities abound for positive, uplifting, and constructive ways to inhabit virtual worlds and online spaces: “online social institutions enable the creation of groups, allow individuals to dialogue and interact online, bridge diverse perspectives and people together, and essentially provide an opportunity to create lifelong connections” (Carter & Shienko 2023: 215). Finding or creating opportunities for connection in the online world is crucial for the lonely and isolated who otherwise struggle to connect with others in the offline world. Research supports the idea that “access to social digital technologies may mitigate many of the negative effects of disruption to in-person or offline relationships”, with virtual connectivity offering various pertinent benefits such as “maintaining relationships, increasing intimacy, and alleviating loneliness” (Stuart et al 2021: 522) in novel and therapeutic ways.

Furthermore, virtual modes of communication eliminate “well-known barriers to social participation include[ing] poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, impairment, illness, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, citizenship, language, criminal history, forms of segregation such as seclusion and incarceration, discrimination, and many other things” (Brownlee 2022: 82). Maintaining one’s grip on the social world with the help of virtual tools serves to attenuate the vicissitudes of life, particularly when life throws you a curveball (or perhaps several all at once), providing new possibilities in overcoming barriers in the offline world that previously stymied certain forms of connection/connectivity.

3.4.2 Virtual Affordances for Keeping in Touch

In the preceding discussions, we witness how “using potentially compensatory forms of online social connection can be beneficial (or at least, alleviate negative outcomes) for those who may be the most at-risk (highly

health anxious and isolated)" (Stuart et al 2021: 524). This has certainly been the case for many socially disconnected agents during extended periods of lockdown measures. In a systematic review of literature by Marciano et al (2022) regarding digital media use by adolescents during the pandemic, certain forms of online engagement were associated with reduced feelings of loneliness and stress: direct (one-to-one) communication, self-disclosure among mutual friends sharing their respective experiences of lockdowns, exchanging stories of uplifting or humorous online encounters, and so forth (Marciano et al 2022). As lockdown measures foreclosed opportunities for social gatherings, virtual modes of communication helped us keep in touch with others. Unable to satisfy one's need for social connection in offline spaces, virtual spaces became surrogates for staying connected with loves ones; or as the case may have been, reaching out to unknown others to assuage one's loneliness.

This line of inquiry raises a couple of questions. Firstly, can a virtual sense of togetherness replicate (or compensate for) the salience of physical togetherness in meaningful ways? Secondly, which similarities and differences in online (as opposed to offline) forms of belongingness are phenomenologically germane for the purposes of remaining anchored to reality in an ocean of turmoil? One way to tackle these questions is to shift the emphasis of the comparison from one of magnitude to one of kind. It would, rather uncontroversially, stand to reason that physical interactions are more "real" than online interactions; getting a virtual hug from a friend (via, say, an emoji on WhatsApp) is certainly not quite the same as (and by this it is meant "not *real* like") a physical hug and the warmth generated through human touch. However, it is something quite different altogether to claim that online interactions are not real *at all*. Online interactions are, after all, of a different *kind* compared with physical interactions.

Indeed, it could be argued that virtual expressivity transmits similar semiotic meaning to that which physical expressivity conveys. When we tag emojis and emoticons to outgoing text messages, we transmit emotional expressions and reactions to others. Sending digital smiles and hugs, therefore, conveys messages of joy, warmth, care, friendship, and so forth. Introducing the notion of "digital tact"—defined as an "embodied means by which we care for each other online", researchers have theorized that digital

hugs, as surrogates for physical hugs, provide a degree of emotional comfort in satisfying the primal "need for groundedness, consolation, comfort, connection, and care", needs which would normally invoke reliance on offline social interactions for personal satiation (James & Leader 2023: 2, 4). The solace of an empathetic embrace, though impossible to recreate digitally, can nonetheless be mediated and simulated through virtual (e.g., visual, audio, textual) representations, coupled with the *powers of one's imagination*.

Similarly, a study by Thomas et al (2022) on sexually motivated behavior during the pandemic found that the desire for physical intimacy led to demand for technologically mediated forms of intimacy in the form of sexting to relieve one's fears and stresses. This study on sexting behavior found that self-disclosure of intimate information and content was an adaptive coping mechanism for many lonely agents dealing with "insecurity and existential anxiety" (Thomas et al 2022: 164). Having done a cost-benefit analysis and determined that desire for intimacy outweighs need for privacy, many lonely (and horny) agents found relief (and release) through sexting. Well, it stands to reason then that if digital hugs do the trick, in terms of providing emotional gratification, temporarily out of reach in prohibited offline spaces, then so too should "digital tugs" and other forms of virtual intimacy of a sexual nature, now within reach through online modes of interaction.

Indeed, whilst of a different kind (than offline forms of interaction), online interactions serve a similar purpose (as physical interactions do): they foster a *salient* sense of togetherness. Sometimes, this sense of virtual togetherness feels so real, it seems *almost as though* you are sharing the same physical space as others you are connecting with virtually. Virtual possibilities for interaction reveal that "while intimacy and closeness can be created in different ways, in-person contact is only sometimes necessary for the quality of relationships to be present" (Carter & Shienko 2023: 211). Moreover, online modes of interaction afford opportunities for fostering togetherness and belongingness without generating the need for inhabiting physical spaces, seeing as virtual technologies are bound by neither geography nor temporality, creating extended and more flexible possibilities for agents the world over to connect across vast expanses of space, time, and social standing.

During the height of lockdowns in the UK, I recall one Zoom group session with friends in New Zealand, to which I was connected via video feed, a session during which I would lean forward from time to time when someone was inaudible, as if I were in the same room as them. I further recall how each time I leaned forward, I would soon realize the futility and ridiculousness of this endeavor, then proceed to lean back, chuckle to myself, and turn up the volume on my laptop speaker instead – only to repeat this entire process several times over throughout the entire Zoom session, as if subconsciously still thinking I was actually in the same room as they were. The best explanation I have for this series of actions, is that my online interactions with my friends were, in those moments, almost as real as though they were happening in the same physical space – such that when I struggled to hear someone speak, I would lean forward *as if* I were in close physical proximity to them (in which case leaning forward would indeed make sense, eliciting better audibility). The Zoom session gave me an experience of connecting with others in different geographical locations and time zones as if we were all inhabiting the same shared (physical) space. Perhaps some readers might find this relatable.

This personal anecdote supports Osler's (2020) observation that "being able to interact face-to-face over live video seems to make a case for some online forms of interpersonal interaction being direct and embodied enough to allow for empathy and, in turn, actual we-experiences" (Osler 2020: 583). Throughout the aforementioned Zoom session, I was under no illusion that I was, as a matter of fact, not in the same physical space as other Zoom session participants. Nevertheless, the interactions were adequately real—in my case, happening in real-time, through live video feed—such that this constituted a we-experience where all participants felt a sense of concurrent togetherness.

Throughout these regular Zoom sessions during the lockdown years of 2020 and 2021, my friends and I were able to maintain a sense of belonging, amongst ourselves as a pre-established social network, despite not being able to meet up physically. The sense of online togetherness may be of a different kind than the sense of offline togetherness, but this does not detract from the fact that a form of togetherness it remains. Moreover, online togetherness can provide a healthy outlet for those who feel particularly disconnected from

society but nonetheless have existential needs to be met: needs proven to be challenging to fulfil through offline means.

Despite the obvious fact that virtual interactions with others are materially different from interactions with them in person, the crux of the matter at hand is whether empathic connections are establishable anyway. Osler (2024) advances the claim that “we can empathetically perceive someone’s lived body when our perceptual access to their body is technologically-mediated” (Osler 2024: 313). The screen on which I connect with others virtually operates as a window through which I have perceptual access to their spaces (and vice versa), alongside empathetic access to their expressivity (and vice versa), affording a merging of experientiality in real time. Encountering others face-to-face via screen-to-screen means allows us as embodied beings to embed ourselves in a mode of interaction in which we can still experience a modicum of the salience otherwise normally experienced through in-person interactions.

Now, before we get too carried away with the abundance of exciting and sensorily stimulating possibilities that technological advancements proliferate, perhaps we ought to heed the advice of Osler and Zahavi (2023) in being wary of thinking that “online sociality is only valuable to the extent that it can perfectly replicate and replace offline sociality” (Osler & Zahavi 2023: 1138). Sure, endless possibilities abound for encountering others online in the here and now. However, we do ourselves—and our future selves—a disservice by using (and relying on) digital technologies in ways that *foreclose* new (and as yet undiscovered and unimagined) opportunities from arising. Furthermore, we must remember that online modes of interaction often operate as a stop-gap measure, filling affective lacunas created by involuntary preclusion from offline togetherness in physical spaces. In other words, the online world is a *surrogate* but not a substitute for meaningful sociality.

As smart technologies becoming increasingly integrated in our daily lives, there is greater demand for novel gadgets that enhance the human experience of interactive realms. To this end, virtual reality (VR) has been making somewhat of a comeback in recent years,[43] reflected in annual increases in VR

[43] URL = <https://www.g2.com/articles/virtual-reality-statistics>

headset sales of late.[44] Renewed uptake in embrace of VR technology is perhaps attributable to immersive new ways of experiencing the sensation of "being there", as one such study on social VR use during the pandemic years to alleviate loneliness and social anxiety would suggest (Kenyon et al 2023). In this study, participants reported that VR experiences were "qualitatively different from other technologies" and the experiences they afford (Kenyon et al 2023: 2). For example, social VR enables collaboration in ways that are limiting or otherwise unavailable in the offline world, overcoming geographic and language barriers. Moreover, virtual technologies generate alternative event-hosting and world-building possibilities, facilitate enhanced modes of human interaction through visually stimulating content creation tools, and so forth (Kenyon et al 2023: 13), extending the repertoire of affordances for social interaction well beyond the offline world. Following social VR use, participants in one study reported feeling less depressed, socially anxious, isolated, and lonely, along with overall improvements in their emotional and social well-being (Kenyon et al 2023: 2, 12, & 13). In this study, those with social phobias were particularly amenable to the non-confrontational modes of forming and maintaining social connections afforded by social VR, helping reduce loneliness and social anxiety.

Subjects who experience heightened levels of social anxiety tend to fear making a poor impression in public offline settings and therefore typically avoid social encounters where practicable, resulting in increased loneliness (Harley et al 2018). To this end, social VR affords the socially disconnected new possibilities to form and maintain relationships that are personally meaningful and therapeutically beneficial. For example, a recent study exploring the therapeutic potential of extended reality-enhanced behavioral activation (XR-BA), a sophisticated form of VR technology, in treating major depressive disorder (MDD) found that VR interventions helped reduce the severity of depression significantly, matching the effectiveness of traditional behavioral activation therapies (Paul et al 2024). The study's authors hint that extended reality (XR) technologies provide promising avenues in destigmatizing mental health interventions, thereby reducing barriers in seeking mental health care. Furthermore, XR's capacity to amplify placebo effects opens up new transformative possibilities with regard to technology-assisted mental health

[44] UTL = <https://www.statista.com/topics/2532/virtual-reality-vr/>

therapies – facilitating enhanced optimization of virtual modes of interaction for further positive therapeutic outcomes to be explored in treating an expanding range of mental health conditions.

3.4.3 Online Gaming and Escapist Motivation

In view of the potential for social VR and other online tools to generate a sense of togetherness, we can indeed conclude that "experiences of affective togetherness do occur online" (Osler 2020: 570). It would appear, then, based on descriptions of interpersonal interactions online (e.g., online gamers describing the virtual worlds they are collectively plugged into, online chat groups set up for certain topics to be discussed, etc.), that "just as in offline sociality, people appear to experience a sense of being together with others online" (Osler 2020: 572-573). This sense of being with others can indeed be felt in virtual environments: that *we* are having a shared experience together.

To illustrate this point, allow me to share another personal anecdote. Whenever I log into a livestream of a band's performance on YouTube, interact with other viewers in the live chat screen (e.g., sharing our collective excitement over an upcoming new album release), and headbang along with them (each of us in front of our respective screens), I feel part of a concert-like live experience together with other metal fans in attendance (online). During livestreams of music events, affording simultaneity of participation for an online crowd, viewers are aware that they are co-watching a shared experience along with others. As such, "viewers are reminded of belonging to a community for the duration of the event" and thereby "feel part of something bigger" (Vandenberg et al 2021: S149). In the throes of pandemic lockdown measures, livestreams had the effect of "preserv[ing] feelings of solidarity in a group that is already established" (ibid.). For the global metalhead community, the absence of live festivals and concerts was rather disconcerting (pardon the pun), diminishing our social lives immeasurably. Being able to connect with our favorite bands—unable to travel and perform due to lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures—provided much needed relief, scratching the itch for metalheads to experience live music together with musically aligned others. Not only do livestreamed concerts serve the social needs of musicians and music lovers alike; they also

allow international audiences, those of frugal means (hence otherwise unable to afford tickets and/or travel expenses), and those suffering physical disabilities (hence otherwise unable to attend in person) to connect and interact in entirely new ways, creating new possibilities for fraternizing and belonging along the lines of shared interests and perspectives on life.

Attendance at virtual concerts via livestreaming platforms affords members of communities of shared interests a plethora of opportunities and possibilities to stay connected with others and continue participating in shared experiences, even when offline events remain out-of-bounds. The same can be said about online gaming, where players have shared emotional experiences in exploring virtual worlds together, swapping thoughts and impressions regarding their amazement at the realistic graphics and engaging storylines. Online campaigns experienced together with other players in multiplayer games can be highly immersive and even friendship-building. Though not necessarily a primary or initial motivation for playing online games, a sense of community is nonetheless—more often than not—a consequence of regular online gaming sessions over prolonged periods of time:

> "One of the end products of playing online games—combined with the immersion and constant social contact—is the development of a sense of belonging for players in online communities. Players strive to be part of a larger online community and they try to make an impact on these communities." (Pietersen et al 2019: 125)

As online gaming communities form over time, a sense of belonging begins to develop among fellow gamers, each of whom likely has a personal interest in their respective communities thriving and growing by attracting new gamers.

Indeed, the sense of togetherness felt in online communities paves the way for a sense of virtual belongingness to emerge. Like the metalhead community, the online gaming community utilizes livestreams as a conduit for socializing. Viewers would tune into a channel and watch a host (usually a recognized skilled player) play an online game in real time, while chatting with viewers who would pose him questions through a chat screen. Viewers can also chat with one another by posting messages in the chat screen. The game livestreamed usually involves the player (livestream host) going on a mission or quest lasting several hours at a time. To this extent, online gamers are probably the most prolific livestreamers. Given the lengthier duration of online gaming

livestreams and higher volume of interactions—between the livestreamer and his online audience, as well as amongst the audience members themselves—online gaming communities tend to form and grow at considerable rates. More renowned livestreamers with higher numbers of subscribers often engage in a practice called "raiding". A raid is when "any creator … can send viewers over to another channel after a stream", which "can be a great way to make connections and network with other broadcasters by sharing audiences and growing your communities".[45] Prominent livestreamers practice raiding as a way to help other livestreamers with lower subscription counts grow their own channels. This is an intriguing form of altruistic behavior, given that the social media sphere is highly competitive, with users vying to have the highest subscription and follower scores possible, more often than not competing directly with other users uploading similar content and targeting similar audiences. Amongst social media users who are also online gamers, however, there is a greater sense of solidarity and camaraderie. There is something it is like to play online games together – and when you do, it can be an enriching and enthralling shared experience. Whether you are a player/livestreamer or an audience member, feelings of togetherness are generated through these interactions that in turn build a sense of virtual belongingness.

Note that online gaming communities don't "just" provide a sense of virtual belongingness; they also provide the socially disconnected with "a sense of autonomy over their online environment [such that] they feel more freedom to communicate openly" (Carter & Shienko 2023: 219). For example, studies have found that World of Warcraft (WoW) players report experiencing less loneliness and social anxiety in the online world in relation to what they tend to experience in the offline world, with online gaming environments providing greater comfort and social support (Martončik & Lokša 2016; Harley et al 2018). However, given the amount of time online gamers dedicate to their hobby, this raises a potentially worrying consideration: could it be that immersion in the online world constitutes a form of *escapism*? A systematic review of literature on online gaming and mental health outcomes found compelling "evidence linking escapist motivation in the context of virtual games to poor mental health and non-adaptive social behavior" (Marques et al 2023: 1). Escape here is defined

[45] URL = <https://help.twitch.tv/s/article/how-to-use-raids?language=en_US>

as “escape from real life”, a similar motivation for substance use/abuse (ibid.). Analysis of the data in this study yielded the inference that “escapist motivation has a negative correlation with mental health outcomes, whether these pertain to gaming habits, emotional processes, ramifications on social interactions, or the nexus between real-life and virtual experiences” (Marques et al 2023: 12), with the authors highlighting the fact that these findings reflect participants’ subjective self-assessments of their use of online gaming for the purposes of escape. However, there is nuance to the type of online gaming in question: “[w]hen comparing MMORPG players with First Person Shooter (FPS) players, it was observed that MMORPG players have stronger motivations for social interaction, while FPS players reported stronger motivations for escapism” (ibid.). Generally, “individuals with greater difficulty adapting to the real world often retreat into games, thus also correlating with narcissistic individuals, transgender individuals, and autism” (Marques et al 2023: 13), suggesting that socially maligned agents of various backgrounds are more likely to seek online gaming as a form of escapism from the brutal realities of the offline world.

What are we to make of escapist proclivities of *some* online gamers? Perhaps we can surmise that “the ability of virtual games to create an immersive ‘world’ wherein individuals can experience a sense of inclusion and interact with diverse individuals” (Marques et al 2023: 14) is a double-edged sword: on one hand, “escapism serves as a moderator of the sensation of loneliness, enabling the promotion of player immersion and compensating for a dearth of real-world interactions (ibid.), but on the other hand, “social anxiety could cause stress and motivate a person to play *in order to avoid* the judgment of other people” (ibid.; emphasis added). Accordingly, “the motive behind someone’s gaming habits is a crucial determinant in assessing and understanding the impact on the player’s health” (ibid.). It is certainly true that “escapism allows virtual game players to ‘escape’ from the mundane, monotonous, unsatisfying, and solitary reality” (ibid.) – hence the appeal of multiplayer gaming platforms, where enriching social interactions absent in “real life” can be sought. However, escapism in the form of suppression of negative thoughts and avoidance of dealing with life challenges may cause greater emotional detachment from one’s life and lead to negative health outcomes. In view of this, the following advice seems rather pertinent:

> "Through understanding the context of an internet user's life, the affordances provided by the online activity they choose to engage in, and their motivations for going online, we can better explain excessive use of the internet and the possible negative outcomes of this, without necessarily framing the behaviour as pathological." (Harley et al 2018: 161)

The complex motivations for engaging in escapist behaviors underscores the need for utilizing the right kind of parlance to accurately capture the lived experiences of the socially disconnected, in the endeavor to discover new ways to buttress the collapsed pillars of belongingness and fortify one's mental health in existentially challenging situations.

3.4.4 Assessing Virtual Environments and Mental Health Outcomes

When one's relationship with the social world alters beyond comfort and recognition, an unbelonging agent will sometimes seek alternatives to re-establish a sense of social connection through whatever means necessary. Experiences of depression are often contiguous with experiences of anxiety, and this was certainly the case during global lockdowns where "health anxiety was strongly associated with depression, and this effect remained even after accounting for isolation behaviors and use of the Internet for social connection" (Stuart et al 2021: 523). Accordingly, the online world can provide respite in various guises, affording new possibilities to maintain a social life through a variety of virtual technologies and platforms.

However, there are drawbacks and concerns. Firstly, online interactions do not properly replicate or replace real-world interactions (nor should they, it ought to be emphasized), mostly fulfilling the role of stop-gap measures. Secondly, overuse of social media can produce a reverse effect: exacerbating rather than alleviating social anxiety, isolation, and alienation. Thirdly, there is an escapist element implicated in over-reliance on online interactions to assuage one's loneliness. Fourthly, the virtual world could open a vulnerable agent to additional harms: for example, abuse from online trolls. Alberti captures these concerns in the following passage:

> "The emergence of online communities as forms of social networks has not replaced the essence of a real-life community, founded on mutual accountability as well as shared interests. Social media has been charged with promoting loneliness and

> preventing people from connecting in real life. But the task for individuals, societies, and governments is to recognize the ways emotional and social patterns of communication online replicate those found in real life (IRL)—including social anxiety and 'lurking' as well as more unsavoury traits linked to trolling. The Internet might well help to build new forms of community and combat loneliness, but only if it is used in ways that promote self-care and wellbeing in the offline realm." (Alberti 2019: 233-234)

As discussed previously, the virtual world does provide a degree of respite for lonely agents seeking connection. However, this may not be an ideal solution for everyone – for in certain cases, one's loneliness may be compounded. Specifically, this could involve "bring[ing] isolation and loneliness into the perspective of identity in which a distance from the norm or a difficulty perceiving the self within a normative range produces isolation in the specific context of the mutually constitutive relationship between the subject and the society" (Cover 2020: 572). In other words, an unintended consequence of immersion in the online world could be a deterioration of one's mental health.

In the endeavor to overcome isolation and alienation through virtual interactions, a lonely and depressed agent may feel more miserable in the realization, through virtual interactions, that there is no way out of her predicament (e.g., no hope of getting better) – particularly when one's suffering is not accorded the desired reaction/response (e.g., recognition of one's ailments, empathy toward one's struggles, words of encouragement, and so forth). Krueger et al (2023) suggest that isolation in depression may be understood as "a profound sense that *no-one* is able to understand their depressed experience, that others *cannot* understand their experience of the world as drained of connection, significance, or energy", experientially akin to a "lack of recognition" (Krueger et al 2023: 1201; original emphasis). Indeed, one ought to avoid failing into the trap of treating the virtual world as a panacea for one's social deficiencies, bearing in mind that lack of recognition can exist in both offline and online contexts. The dilemma, of course, is that forays into virtual spaces are very much trial-and-error expeditions: sometimes you find what you are looking for (i.e., have your needs satisfied), and other times you end up feeling even more lost, confused, and miserable than before.

There is ample evidence that virtual technologies, in facilitating new possibilities to connect with others, help us feel less lonely, isolated, alienated, socially anxious, and depressed. Equally so, studies show that the motivations

for immersing oneself in online communities can have unintended adverse consequences for one's mental health. Thus, while it is true that the online world affords the socially disconnected new/better opportunities for social connection and interaction, could it be possible that virtual environments also exacerbate feelings of loneliness and emptiness (as the likes of Turkle have suggested)? There is no easy way to answer this question: different tools of measurement and lines of inquiry yield different results and interpretations. Harley et al (2018) warn that referencing frequency of use of certain virtual technologies as a measure of degree of associated loneliness is not only one-dimensional but rather misses the point: that different tools serve different needs for different agents. In other words, drawing correlations between loneliness and internet use ought to focus not on "how much/often" but rather "why" and "what for" considerations, to avoid oversimplifying and trivializing experiences. Therefore, reorientating oneself toward the online world can be a mixed bag, in terms of "getting oneself out of the funk" of loneliness.

Consider how, on one hand, there are "ways in which technology can be used to carve out spaces for being alone, as a deliberate attempt to disengage from the social"; but on the other hand, we can also use digital/online technologies "as a way to reconfigure our current experience, which could even have potential benefits for our mental well-being" (Harley et al 2018: 168-169). Virtual modes of social interaction have demonstrably ameliorative effects, when used appropriately, to attenuate adverse health conditions and alleviate negative thoughts and emotions (Stuart et al 2021). Indeed, "online social connection is important in both compensating for reduced offline support as well as mitigating against social and psychological vulnerabilities" (Stuart et al 2021: 524). Thus, the online world *can* provide a safety net and haven—for those who find themselves untethered from the offline world, beset with unmet existential needs of the richer kind, such as intimacy and companionship[46]—in rediscovering a sense of self-worth and seeking alternative wellness routes.

The motivation to seek alternative virtual pathways to redress social connection deficiencies supports the claim that there is indeed something it is like to interact with others online in therapeutically beneficial ways. Perhaps

[46] For further analysis on the correlation between loneliness and unattainable social goods, see Roberts & Krueger (2021).

this is where/how some *hikikomori* find a sense of belonging: a sense of belonging found in the online world not otherwise or previously achievable in the offline world. Virtual interactions through which one can experience some semblance of togetherness—whether it be as a member of a WhatsApp or Telegram chat group or as a player in multiplayer online games such as WoW and League of Legends—afford agents the necessary existential comforts to be their authentic selves and better poised to gain a sense of belonging (McDougall 2015). The right online community where one fits in with relative ease enables participants to be themselves, sans social anxiety, thereby generating new opportunities for experiencing higher quality interactions (Carter & Shienko 2023) and new possibilities for overcoming mental health challenges.

The studies on internet use and mental health outcomes surveyed thus far predominantly pertain to younger participants, a lacuna I seek to address in this section's concluding remarks. Research conducted by Hunsaker and Hargittai (2020) on online habits of older adults yielded the following findings:

> "When specifically examining which particular topics may be related to anxiety, we found that belonging to online communities on the topics of retirement and religion related to greater anxiety while holding all other factors constant. When it came to participation in meaningful online discussions by topic, many topics from general ones (e.g., gardening, religion, and finances) to ones specifically about health and aging (e.g., retirement, caregiving, and having a health condition) related to greater anxiety." (Hunsaker & Hargittai 2020: 716)

Thus, "although older adults are engaging in a multitude of ways to interact socially online, such use may not relate to more favorable clinical indicators of mental health (i.e., lower anxiety levels)" (Hunsaker & Hargittai 2020: 716). It would appear, therefore, that "the topics around which online social interactions occur matter as engaging in topics on health and aging were linked to greater anxiety", given that "such topics may relate to distress as they can be emotionally wrought subjects to discuss" (Hunsaker & Hargittai 2020: 717). The lesson in these observations is that discretion ought to be exercised in directing one's attention appropriately in virtual modes of interaction. For older adults suffering from higher levels of anxiety, pivoting toward counselling services rather than, say, online chat rooms could be a more effective way of addressing one's psychological needs. In furtherance of this endeavor, we can draw inspiration from therapists who work with the *hikikomori*, some of society's most

chronically isolated and lonely agents, who have devised various virtual platforms as secure and private channels offering online counselling services that deliver “better-coping flexibility” and empower the socially disconnected to “self-direct themselves out of a socially withdrawn period” (Hu et al 2022: 8) toward embracement of prosocial ways of encountering the world.

When a sense of belonging is jeopardized, or feels altogether out of reach in offline contexts, some agents will reorientate themselves to the online world as a means of restoring missing pillars of a homelike existence – perhaps in pursuit of better mental health outcomes, or perhaps to regain a (new/better/greater) sense of connection with the world of sociality. Disruptions to, and distortions of, one’s homelike existence take several forms – several of which I have analyzed in this chapter. In the following chapter, I widen and deepen the channels of inquiry, surveying a range of contexts in which belongingness unravels, breaks down, and goes awry – with a view to assessing what kinds of outcomes may follow from such detours along the existential journeys of wayward seekers of belongingness.

Chapter 4:

When Belongingness Unravels, Breaks Down, and Goes Awry

The journey to belong and maintain one's belongingness is perilous, fraught with unknown others, malign forces, and all kinds of existential threats. What happens when attempts to belong *fail*? Some unbelonging agents withdraw from society; others find various alternatives to access the necessary existential goods, for example, pivoting from the offline world to the online world. Others yet, having failed in attempts to belong in more ordinary and conventional ways, may continue their search for homelikeness on the edges and far-flung corners of society, where all kinds of niche subcultures ply their trade. To this end, this chapter seeks to shine a light on the variety of ways and contexts in which belongingness *unravels*, *breaks down*, and *goes awry*.

In section 4.1, I examine what it is like when the drive to belong is unsuccessful and belongingness eventually breaks down. To this end, I introduce a tripartite taxonomy—belongingness, nonbelongingness, and unbelongingness—to account for the spectrum of valence and affectivity comprising positive, neutral, and negative states respectively.

In section 4.2, I explore how unbelongingness is a matter of displacement for both nationalist movements and marginalized minorities, from often contrasting perspectives of what "home" and "homeland" means in relation to "feeling at home". Displacement is a form of unbelongingness—relating to one's affinity for place, location, or country/nation—*not* captured by loneliness, thus constituting a niche and unique form of unbelongingness warranting further investigation and extrapolation.

In section 4.3, I introduce the concept of "*toxic* belongingness" in the analysis of four variants (subsets) of belongingness—fake, false, fringe, and forced—as exemplified by various collectives/communities such as (but not

limited to) gangs, religious cults (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses. Scientology, etc.), extremist political ideologies (e.g., white nationalism, Antifa, BLM, etc.), conspiracist organizations (e.g., Flat Earth, QAnon, etc.), and so forth. This analysis provides new insights on what happens when those lacking (and deprived of) belongingness go to unusual and even extreme lengths to re-discover, re-capture, and re-establish a sense of belonging.

In section 4.4, I highlight where the phenomenological investigation of the experientiality of belongingness, nonbelongingness, and unbelongingness may lead us next – flagging possible future directions for expanding/extending the taxonomy of belongingness, in terms of interrogating other collectives and communities of shared identities and interests of a more unconventional nature.

By surveying experiences of breakdown in belongingness across a variety of different contexts, and assessing the similarities and differences in agents' responses, common themes (e.g., similar kinds of threats to the pillars' foundations) may be revealed. As unbelonging agents seek to regain access to missing existential goods, having failed to find more benign alternatives (such as those pursued in the examples of the *shamate* and the *honjok*, as well as cases of reorientation from the offline world to the online world), they may become susceptible to toxic forms of belongingness instead. The objective of this chapter is to shine a light on instances where attempts to address and overcome unbelongingness drive some agents to dark corners of society, with a view to enhancing our understanding of the coping mechanisms and strategies of unbelonging agents in finding and establishing their place in the world.

4.1 Missing Belongingness: Unbelongingness and Nonbelongingness

Belongingness can unravel, break down, and go awry in a variety of different ways. When agents find themselves in unbelonging circumstances, it may be inferred that some or all of the pillars of belongingness are missing. Belongingness and unbelongingness are positioned on opposite ends of the

spectrum of experiences of *being-with-others*, reflecting the spectrum of experiences of *being-by-yourself* (examined in the previous chapter) in its positive, neutral, and negative conceptions. Thus, just as experiences of being-by-yourself implicating neither solitude nor loneliness reside in the (neutral) territory of *aloneness*, experiences of being-with-others implicating neither belongingness nor unbelongingness reside in the (neutral) territory of *nonbelongingness*. In this section, I set out why I believe it is necessary to distinguish between the phenomenon of unbelongingness (a negative state) and the phenomenon of nonbelongingness (a neutral state)—both of which diverge from the phenomenon of belongingness (a positive state)—in assessing what kinds of absences of existential goods we are dealing with: "mere" absence, or something more than that (i.e., lack or loss, which lead to different existential outcomes potentially psychopathologically significant). To recap:

- A **loss** is necessarily both a lack and an absence. If I do not have *x* anymore, it is missing (i.e., absent) and thus a privation (i.e., lack) – the operative word here being "anymore", denoting something (in this case, *x*) being taken away from me.
- A **lack** is an absence but not necessarily a loss. Although *x* may be absent, it is incorrect to infer that *x* has been taken away from me (perhaps it simply was not there to begin with).
- An **absence** may take the form of lack or loss, but there are certainly varieties of absences characterized by neither lack nor loss.

Applying the aforementioned definitions to a real-life example of missing existential goods, imagine the following scenario: The fact that I do not have a luxury yacht in my possession is a lack only if its absence bothers me or somehow impinges on my agency and sense of self-fulfilment; otherwise, it is quite simply an absence (and nothing more). Now consider someone else whose luxury yacht has gone up in flames, his new yacht-less state of affairs is thereby *also* a loss – not just a lack (and, of course, an absence too).

In highlighting neutral experiences of being-with-others as phenomenologically distinct from negative experiences of being-with-others, we can distinguish lived experiences characterized by absence (but *not* lack or loss) of existential goods, implicating neutral emotions/moods, from lived

experiences characterized by lack or loss of existential goods, implicating negative emotions/moods. Accordingly, we can make a case for the feeling-out-of-place lived experiences of some agents (e.g., refugees, exiled dissidents, persecuted minorities) being more deleterious, disadvantageous, or detrimental than feeling-out-of-place lived experiences of others (e.g., tourists, students, digital nomads) – and figure out (makes sense of) why this is so.

For the sake of emphasis, the definition of unbelongingness offered here relates intrinsically to a *lack* or *loss* of sociality, as opposed to a "mere" *absence* of sociality. This lack or loss of sociality is characterized by an inability to feel valued/cherished in, or be meaningfully involved in, the social world, coupled with experiencing negative fit or lack/loss of fit in a social environment. In other words, the state of affairs surrounding unbelongingness is involuntary (as opposed to nonbelongingness; which tends to be voluntary, as I would argue). The result of a lack or loss of sociality is a disintegration in an agent's social embeddedness. The inability of agents to find themselves "at home in the social world" causes what Rashed (2021) refers to as "maldistribution and misrecognition": with the former pertaining to jeopardized material conditions and one's diminished access to resources and opportunities, and the latter pertaining to jeopardized social relations through diminished cultural and linguistic access (Rashed 2021: 299). Additionally, there are complexities and nuances in how unbelongingness is experienced; for example, sociocultural influences on the experience of pain (Miyahara 2021), and lack of person-environment fit being correlated with stigmatization, devaluation of social identity, and lack of authenticity (Schmader and Sedikides 2018). Unhomelike spaces are characterized by atmospheres which "leave bodies disturbed, restless, unsettled, or on-edge—that is, feeling not fully at-home wherever they happen to be" (Krueger 2021: 116). These experiences of absences are more distinctly defined by tangible and palpable loss or lack of opportunities for social connection and attainment of vital existential goods.

In contrast, there are situations where an agent, while not feeling like she belongs there, does not otherwise feel rejected or excluded (say, on account of hostile attitudes directed at her). This is certainly the case for a tourist. Short of someone yelling racial epithets at you, telling you to "go back to where you came from", there is no reason for you to feel unwelcome. As a tourist, you are

acutely aware that you do not belong there – and that is perfectly fine. As a matter of fact, this is precisely *why* we travel: to consciously and intentionally place ourselves in environments and situations which we *expect* to encounter as foreign (*to* us) – despite the fact that *we* (not they) are the foreigners when we *hand* in someone else's *homeland*. From time to time, it may be exciting and pleasurable to be confronted with the strange, the weird, and the obscure – hence the reason we go abroad. What if the grass is greener on the other side? Perhaps I ought to head over and have a wee nibble. "Nom, nom, nom…burp!" So, we dine out at local restaurants, take photos of all the pretty food, then post them all over social media so the WWW (whole wide world) can give a toss or develop FOMO (or whatever the motivation for uploading said photos might be).

Note that the experience of being a tourist (i.e., in tourist-mode) is not altogether dissimilar to the experience of being a guest (i.e., in guest-mode) at a party or event. The tourist is a visitor in a foreign land/environment, for a temporary period of time, and can leave any time. The stakes are roughly the same for a guest. There are indeed similarities between these modes of experience, yet a guest is more likely to be susceptible to unbelongingness. The reason for this is social expectation: as a guest at a dinner party or other social gathering, you are expected to engage with other guests, and participate in the activities and festivities of the evening, having been *invited there by someone specifically*. A tourist, on the other hand, is not obliged to participate in any activity or event whatsoever. An agent in guest-mode is beckoned by others to participate in the goings-on of a shared space in a manner which an agent in tourist-mode does not find herself socially entangled in or obliged to.

Thus, there is a certain expectation that a guest participates with some reasonable level of decorum and minimal degree of enthusiasm (e.g., basic rules-of-thumb like "don't be a cunt"; no staring/gawking, or at least look like you're not doing it; "for goodness' sake stop picking your nose here", avoid/minimize chronic yawning, etc.). A guest who fails to engage with others in some rudimentary fashion is likely, on the balance of probabilities, to find herself becoming persona non grata in no time (particularly from the person who invited her, who may or may not be the host). The space henceforth *disinvites* and *displaces* her, indicating to her—through the actions and reactions of others (e.g., other guests frowning, whispering, backing away,

etc.)—that her presence is no longer welcome there. Such fate does not befall a tourist, who is at liberty to enter and exit spaces as she pleases without being judged or ostracized; and of course, leave the country altogether, anytime (before the entry visa expires). In guest-mode, you have a role to play; namely, to contribute to the mood and atmosphere of the party. However, in tourist-mode, there is no such expectation: you can come and go as you please and at your leisure, and you are left to your own devices to do your own thing. These factors point to the tourist-mode of encountering the world as one defined by *nonbelongingness*. A tourist's pillars of belongingness remain intact and accessible in her country of origin; any feelings of unhomelikeness during her travels are, in the grand scheme of things, merely fleeting moments of uncanniness soon forgotten about upon returning to wherever she is domiciled.

The critical lesson in mapping out the experientiality of an agent in tourist-mode is that, in order to feel unbelongingness, one ought to (at the very least attempt to) participate in a social environment to which you wish to belong. In cases of nonbelongingness, such as the case of the tourist reveals, perhaps there is no desire or need to participate (proactively so anyway). A tourist's pillars of belongingness are not threatened in the same manner as, say, an agent in new-migrant-mode finds herself being confronted with. Sure, a tourist is just as much a foreigner—*a stranger in a strange land*—as a new migrant or refugee. However, the key difference is that a tourist will eventually return to her homeland, whereas a migrant (having made a personal commitment to start a new life overseas) likely has no immediate or imminent desire to return to her homeland. The stakes are certainly different for a tourist, compared to the stakes for a migrant. A tourist is a stranger only for a temporary and defined stint, and as such the status of being a stranger is existentially insignificant.

A tourist has no desire or need to integrate, so any feelings of being out of place are inconsequential (perhaps even somewhat exciting – a bit of a rush). On the other hand, a migrant—having committed to making a new home out of the foreign land she has chosen to domicile herself in—is saddled with the burden or integrating and assimilating in ways that are neither relevant for, nor imposed on, a tourist. In other words, for a migrant, it matters that she feels out of place in the sense that it is a problem to be overcome. A tourist has a home to return to, and therefore any time spent in foreign lands is unlikely to have any

material bearing on her way of life, other than memories of what has hopefully been an enjoyable experience of an unfamiliar environment. In the event that a tourist has unpleasant experiences (for instance, has racist encounters with hostile locals), these interactions ought to confirm that she indeed does not belong in this foreign land (the grass wasn't so green after all, as it turned out), reaffirming that she belongs in her homeland after all, where she is usually domiciled. In other words, tourist experiences may reveal new insights, enabling an agent to *reassess* and *recalibrate* where she belongs,.

Moreover, and unlike a new migrant, a tourist has the *freedom from* needing to belong wherever it is that she travels to and spends (limited) time in. given that these experiences of foreign environments are temporary and time-bound. Accordingly, tourist experiences can indeed be described as nonbelonging; in other words, an absence rather than lack or loss of belonging. Not belonging in a foreign land is neutrally-valenced, since it is largely inconsequential for a tourist's long-term sense of where she belongs (she already has it, back home). Of course, it may well be the case that a tourist is attracted to a city she has previously travelled to, and subsequently decides to relocate there. Nevertheless, it is the nonbelongingness associated with being a tourist that allows this agent the freedom to make decisions about her orientation toward the world at large (i.e., whether home is indeed where she is domiciled; or perhaps she might belong elsewhere instead), and the temporality of this way of life (i.e., how long the belongingness may last for).

Nonbelonging agents are not in a state of vulnerability with respect to access to existential goods, in the manner in which unbelonging agents are. With respect to unbelonging agents (e.g., those in new-migrant-mode), access to existential goods is contingent on their pillars being properly scaffolded, on foreign soil, in a timely fashion such that their respective life journeys may continue uninterrupted and unabated. Whereas nonbelonging agents (e.g., tourists and digital nomads) encounter missing existential goods as "mere" absences, unbelonging agents (e.g., refugees and new migrants) encounter missing existential goods as types of lack and/or loss – and it goes without saying that the consequences and ramifications are in all likelihood more deleterious for the latter than for the former. Unbelonging agents, unlike nonbelonging agents, experience having some or all of the pillars missing.

Similarly to a tourist, a digital nomad's experiences can generally be described as nonbelonging. This agent is one who enjoys freedom (of expression, movement, assembly, etc.), independence, variety/novelty, and is likely adequately socially well-equipped (i.e., has the life skills/experience) to find *temporary* belongingness where need be. The lived experiences of a digital nomad are similar/comparable to those of a tourist in terms of nonbelonging encounters, being a temporary guest in a foreign land. However, unlike a tourist, a digital nomad may not have a fixed place of return wherever it is she originally haled from. For a digital nomad, home is wherever she is based at any given time. And that works just fine for her. She is a free spirit who is unbothered by the apparent lack of a fixed abode or home base.

For a digital nomad, she carries *the seeds of homelikeness* with her, to wherever it is she nominates as her temporary home-country (now/next), thereafter planting those seeds to germinate. Her primary motivation is to explore the world and experience all that life has to offer, hence her lifestyle choice to suit these needs, desires, and goals. Belongingness for her means dedication to her personhood as her life project. A sense of adventure, coupled with personal ambition/drive, acts as her compass regarding where she might be the best fit: being able to harness life opportunities afforded to her by wherever it is she is domiciled, and channel them toward attaining self-fulfilment and self-actualization. A digital nomad, like a tourist, may well decide in some conceivable possible future to relocate on a more permanent basis to a country where she has previously spent a considerable amount of time and therefore developed a bond with this new environment. Nevertheless, a digital nomad is not bound by—i.e., free from—the pressures associated with fitting in, since her lifestyle and way of life is such that she *need not belong*. And she need not belong, or worry herself with considerations of unbelongingness, on account of the fact that her access to subjective existential needs is not in any jeopardy.

Now let us turn to the case of temporary migrants (consisting mostly of international students and expats), whose experiences differ from those of tourists and digital nomads – the key difference being level of commitment over time to navigating and inhabiting new spaces in search of pillars of belongingness. Some students and expats intend to return to their respective homelands upon completing their programs of study and contracted periods of

employment respectively. Others have plans to stay on, perhaps with the intention of building new lives for themselves. For the former, their experiences of feeling out of place, where they do occur, are likely affectively more akin to those of tourists; i.e., nonbelongingness. For the latter, however, if experiences of feeling out of place become protracted*, nonbelongingness may well evolve into unbelongingness*. The experientiality of being-with-others is a sliding scale lubricated by time. Pull and push factors—in spaces that pull you in and push you away, experienced over time—may shift your place on the sliding scale.

Changing circumstances with the passage of time change the nature of my belongingness to a place. For instance, the lived experience of connection-to-land/place/nation for a Ukrainian national, happily domiciled in his country until the recent Russian invasion, may shift from a state of belongingness to a state of nonbelongingness (e.g., for those who “tough it out” and remain in Ukraine, despite resenting the political situation; those who feel caught in the middle; and so on.) or perhaps even a state of unbelongingness (i.e., those who leave Ukraine and claim refugee status elsewhere). The case of nonbelonging Ukrainians who choose not to flee (like many others have, even when their home countries are ravaged with war) presents an interesting case of agents who find themselves stuck in a no-man’s-land [sic] type situation, caught between a rock and a hard place, where familiarities and unfamiliarities interweave such that it is difficult to navigate right/wrong and good/bad life choices/decisions. Moreover, it is worth noting that the lived experiences of nonbelonging Ukrainians differ vastly from the lived experiences of nonbelonging agents the likes of students and expats, with respect to the nature of absence – revealing the sheer scope of complexities, intricacies, and nuances of lived experiences across different sociocultural contexts within the sphere of nonbelongingness.

In this section, I have pitched nonbelongingness as a neutral state of affairs – a midway point, if you will, between unbelongingness (on the negative end) and belongingness (on the positive end), along the spectrum of experientiality of being-with-others. I presented the examples of tourists, digital nomads, and temporary migrants (students, expats) as lived experiences of nonbelongingness: where there is no explicit need to belong (or reassess one’s belongingness). Comparing and contrasting the cases of tourists, digital

nomads, and temporary migrants with cases of permanent migrants (seeking residency in new countries) reveals that temporality—and experiences thereof—is a significant determinant in where the agent lies along the scale of belongingness; and as a corollary, what this translates into with regard to other aspects of their lives (e.g., the kinds of effects on their mental health). Based on this analysis, parallels can be made between nonbelongingness and aloneness, a neutral state (or midway point) between loneliness (on the negative end) and solitude (on the positive end).

Thus, just as loneliness is characterized by (de)privation of existential (specifically, social) needs, unbelongingness is characterized by paucity of meaningful social connections. Where a void cannot be filled—be it a lack of friends, a loss of one's livelihood, and so forth—one is deprived of the vitality and vibrancy of life so often necessary for maintaining one's mental health. When existential goods are/go missing—specifically, lacking and/or lost—in a particular space/place, rendering your needs unmet, relocation may be a reasonable response, however reluctant you may be. A place where you cannot self-actualize, or even make ends meet, is no place for you.

Now that we possess a template for distinguishing unbelongingness (lack and/or loss) from nonbelongingness ("mere" absence only; no lack or loss), having surveyed examples distinguishing the former from the latter, we can begin our foray into the dark corners, murky waters, and shady back-alleys of the realms of unbelongingness.

4.2 Displacement and Unbelongingness

As the title of this Thesis suggests, the objective of this research is to account for the phenomenology and psychopathology of feeling out of place. The implication here is twofold. Firstly, that there is indeed something it is like to belong in a manner that is personally grounding. In other words, in a state of belongingness, where a sense of safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, freedom, and (as the case may be) significance (too) exist, an agent feels tethered and

anchored to a homelike existence. Secondly, that lacking belongingness could make you unwell in certain respects. For instance, an inability to enact a sense of belonging—often through extended and unwanted bouts of loneliness—can cause conditions symptomatic of mental illnesses (like depression and anxiety) to emerge (more on this in Chapter 5). There is a third implication, explicated in greater detail in this section: that the concept of place is not just central to the phenomenon of belongingness, but holds particular *significance* (i.e., greater value, deeper meaning, higher purpose, and the like) for certain types of belongingness. I am referring specifically to the types of belongingness where it is insufficient, for the establishment of homelikeness, "just" to feel a sense of safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, and freedom; hence, it is imperative one feels a sense of significance *as well* in order to belong. With respect to this present investigation of displacement, only by recognizing the phenomenon of belongingness for its extended dimensionality—namely, *political and spiritual dimensions* here—are we able to grasp what belongingness means for those who see their selves and identities as inseparable from (i.e., interwoven and intertwined with) place and the *meaning embedded there*.[47]

Variants of belongingness tied to (geographical) place constitute special cases where the pillar of significance matters to the foundations of homelikeness *in addition to* the five core pillars. In these special cases, place is quite simply irreplaceable. Place is therefore central to this particular construction of belongingness. What matters for these types of belongingness is more than just connection with others (who are, in theory, replaceable); it is about connection with place (usually one's ancestral homeland, which is irreplaceable). For the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, as a prime example, there is no other place as homelike as Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand, meaning "land of the long white cloud") itself. A disconnected Māori agent can always find new sets of friends, but she will not be able to find another Aotearoa. Indigenous, ethnic, and other minority communities share with other communities of greater presence and visibility the conviction that one's identity and conception of home are intrinsically linked with place/land.

[47] This is where a theory of meaning-mining (alluded to earlier in the footnote at the end of the section on the Pillar of Significance), supported by perspectives from autopoietic enactivism and biosemiotics enactivism, can help explicate why place is so significant (i.e., matters so much) for certain place-bound and place-orientated variants of belongingness.

Such is the importance—magnitude of significance and meaning—ascribed to place that it can be a *space of contention* and even a *battleground for survival*.

For the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, both of whom lay claim to the same patch of land as their ancestral homeland, the significance of place to their respective sociocultural forms of belongingness means that conflict is bound to simmer under the surface when contentious matters remain unresolved and where compromise is inconceivable. Place-bound forms of belongingness foreground the preservation of identity. To preserve one's identity, one must be certain of undisturbed—and undisputed—access to the necessary existential goods only a particular place can provide. What happens when the existential goods are scarce? When rival groups compete for the same resources, disharmony is bound to arise at any given moment. As a result, members of one or more communities may miss out on life-sustaining existential needs – forced to relocate someplace more hospitable and homelike.

4.2.1 Displacement and Politics of Belonging

Not every situation or context in which belongingness is missing is captured by unbelongingness. In the previous section, I posited that there exists a neutral state of being-with-others—*nonbelongingness*—that implicates phenomenal aspects of absence (as opposed to lack or loss) of social connection, much the same way a neutral state of being-by-yourself (i.e., aloneness) implicates phenomenal aspects of absence (as opposed to lack or loss) of social goods.

Based on the foregoing, parallels can be drawn between loneliness (a lack or loss of social goods) and unbelongingness (a lack or loss of social connection). Given that a lack or loss of social goods, in most cases, stems from a lack or loss of social connection (hence the primal drive to belong to communities to ensure needs are met), a further inference can be made about the connection between loneliness and unbelongingness: that the former is a subset of the latter. Experiences of loneliness are therefore necessarily and unequivocally experiences of unbelongingness. However, the reverse is not necessarily true: there exist experiences of unbelongingness not captured by experiences of loneliness. To this end, I introduce the phenomenon of

displacement—another subset of unbelongingness—presenting us with an interesting and nuanced form of unbelongingness characterized by lived experiences *not associated with loneliness*.

Whereas loneliness captures estrangement from the social sphere, displacement captures estrangement from place/land: being cut off from a lifeline of existential goods only a particular space/location can afford. Making sense of displacement and its effect on certain sociocultural groups sheds light on a subset of unbelongingness pertaining to negative outcomes from competing and conflicting over existential goals, where identity is a paramount consideration (and point of contention, as the case may be). Explicating the phenomenon of displacement and its behavioral implications draws attention to (a) the importance of place (not just social connections/relations) in the scaffolding of one's homelikeness and (b) why, in certain contexts, place is so important to belonging that it becomes a political (and politicized) matter. This place isn't for *everyone*, some would say. This place is *special* to me (in ways you cannot possibly comprehend), others would say. If you say this country belongs to you but not to me, where does this leave me? This place can be home for me too, no? Perhaps there are some spaces better suited for me anyway. These more homelike spaces will eventually (hopefully) reveal themselves to me. Ideally, a space for me, for you, and for *us*.

To feel like you belong is to experience spaces that *pull you in* (i.e., reel you towards them). An inviting space has a certain magnetism about it; you cannot help but feel drawn to it. As you venture into this space and traverse its boundaries, you may feel your heartstrings being tugged at. You resonate with this space on account of the "good vibes" you sense. The more time you spend in this space, the more homelike it feels to you, on account of the pillars (and what they afford you) being present. The more homelike the space feels, the more inclined you are to return to spend more time there. Think of your own abode, a personal/private space which you have carefully crafted and curated for your enjoyment and optimalization. As Colombetti and Krueger (2015) postulate, "[t]he more one trusts, and accordingly relies on, a certain resource, the more individualized it becomes; on the other hand, the more individualized and thus entrenched the resource is, the more trusted and relied upon it becomes" (Colombetti & Krueger 2015: 1169). Put differently, a homelike space

to which one is coupled operates like a two-way street: one in which you can place yourself—somewhere you can mentally and physically insert yourself, seamlessly so—on account of the space being inviting and welcoming, drawing you in and soliciting participation from you. Of course, every now and then, you may have uncanny and unpleasant interactions and experiences which throw you off. Perhaps doubt and uncertainty creep in. You are no longer entirely sure this space is inviting or welcoming. Homelikeness is never static. There are push and pull factors at work all the time. Such is life (homelike or not).

To feel like you do not belong is to experience spaces that *push you away*. In response, you step *back*, withdrawing your participation in these spaces – sometimes stepping *away* altogether in more severe cases of rejection. There will be other spaces for me, you tell yourself. And thus begins your journey to find new spaces of belonging. There are other spaces to place yourself in. Perhaps these spaces lie further afield. In your quest for more homelike pastures, you may encounter resistance and obstacles. For the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) peoples, unbelongingness and displacement are common features of their lived experiences. Forced to adapt wherever they go—sometimes having to uproot, leave, and start all over again, elsewhere—members of the GRT communities contend with fight-or-flight decisions frequently. Home, for these communities, is built on the shifting sands of time.

Where there is personal or political conflict, different clusters of belongingness must figure out how they can coexistent harmoniously; and in failing to do so, how belongingness can be rebuilt elsewhere. To this end, "[i]t is the exploration of those often hidden spaces that enables democratic negotiations, the possibility of what we may call a politics of becoming" (Dumm 2008: 37). For a Palestinian refugee fleeing Gaza, there may exist opportunities for a life to be rebuilt amidst postwar negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government. In the example of the returning expat, opportunities may exist for the continuation of his life built overseas by readapting to one's old stomping ground. In both cases, the respective agents may have to reassess their expectations. For instance: can a sense of belongingness be enacted, despite not all the pillars of belongingness being present? Possibilities to belong (or otherwise) reveal themselves in the interactional milieux across various sociocultural settings. Just as there are

markers of identity, there are markers of place too – and these markers often overlap: think of the symbols, landmarks, traditions, cuisines, art, literature, and so forth that draw you to certain spaces because they represent or reflect some aspects of who you are; and conversely, those markers of place/identity that repel you from certain spaces (and why).

Markers of both place and identity hold wide salience and appeal, being "items of material culture [that] can scaffold the affective states not only of individuals but of social groups" (Colombetti & Krueger 2015: 1171). This brings us to the crux of the issue: why place matters so much for some agents. Identity markers have the power to transport you back to a certain place in time through the memories they invoke. For example, whenever I taste my favorite dishes (from my childhood days growing up in the South-East Asian region) during my travels, I find myself mentally-time-travelling back to previous occasions when I enjoyed the same dishes, perhaps in the company of so-and-so. These dishes connect me back to my birth country of Singapore (and the region of South-East Asia more generally), and to whomever I have such shared meal experiences with, wherever I may be in the world. Shared cultural experiences acts as reminders to you and other members of your community that places of communion (e.g., Chinese restaurants where annual Chinese New Years celebrations are held) act as *vortexes* of belongingness.

Experiences of displacement tell us something about unwelcome spaces pushing back on us and pushing us away. Hence, we say that we feel out of place when it comes to our attention that we are, so to speak, a fish out of water, a square peg in a round hole, or a stranger in a strange land. In other words, we know when we do not fit somewhere, because this somewhere somehow pushes us away. To not belong is to be repelled by one's environment. To this end, an unbelonging agent feels displaced. In displacement, one experiences a certain unhomelikeness. And in this unhomelikeness, there is a sense that something is missing and *amiss*: the usual atmosphere of warmth, *hygge*, *gezelligheid*, or conviviality has dissipated. Life events taking place at the level of the ordinary and mundane—everyday lived experiences—contain observable actions, interactions, and reactions in which resonance or otherwise can be ascertained.

In navigating social spaces, we experience being pulled in or pushed away. From time to time, we may find that "the reach of our selves to others becomes so fragmented and confused that we find ourselves arrested, or halted, or otherwise blocked from contact with them and from ourselves" such that we find ourselves in a situation of "unhappy removal from a life lived in common with others" (Dumm 2008: 28). Spaces and places that push us away range from the inhospitable to the uninhabitable. Imagine a Palestinian refugee returning to her homeland one day. The place has become unrecognizable from the ruins of war. Livelihoods are upended, loved ones are deceased, and futures are destroyed. Her homeland is no longer what it once was. For political refugees fleeing places like Palestine and Ukraine due to war, as well as those fleeing persecution and prosecution (e.g., political dissidents, journalists, LGBTQIA+ individuals, etc.), their respective homelands are no longer liveable due to forces beyond their control (and reasons unrelated to loneliness). Nevertheless, politically displaced agents are in a similar position to many other displaced agents: like it or not, home is now someplace else.

However, note that not all displaced agents leave their homeland. Some remain and try rebuilding a sense of belonging, whatever the odds. Throughout human history, various communities have asserted their respective sense of national or ethnocultural identity in ways that have given rise to civil unrest or international conflict. Take for instance, once again, the recent conflict between Israel and Palestine since October 2023, which subsequently escalated into full-fledged warfare. Both Israelis and Palestinians have historical claims to the regions in which they live, being ancestral lands from which they originated. Both sets of populations have their sense of national identity tethered to their respective geographical regions (in this case, with a degree of overlap). Like the Māori people of New Zealand, Jews and Palestinian Arabs have been known to engage in political activism to assert their belongingness rights when local and world events have threatened their claim rights to their respective ancestral homelands. Protests on university campus grounds in 2024 in the UK and the US, two countries with sizeable communities of Israeli and Middle Eastern origin, are a prime example of political tussles over land rights and national belongingness spilling out into the world stage.

In New Zealand, Māori activists continue to be involved in legal battles—in particular, Treaty of Waitangi settlement cases in courts over *iwi* land rights—to this day as they fight for compensation for historical injustices (e.g., lands confiscated under colonialism). To preserve one's identity and way of life, it is sometimes necessary to quite literally fight for the right to belong. When this happens, belongingness becomes a political statement. Land becomes a battleground when place becomes irreplaceable. Irreplaceable, because the continuity of oneself (and one's way of life) is contingent on interactions, rituals, and traditions only specific spaces and locations can accommodate. Whether it be the Māori people of New Zealand, the druid community of Cornwall, or the various Native American tribes of America, their right (and fight, as the case may be) to belong is borne out of a deep connection with one's homeland (or a particular region of it). With respect to the druid community of Cornwall (many of whom have lived there for generations), their sense of belonging to the region is tethered to the history of the region, the communities that inhabit the area, and the rites and rituals still practiced there. Druid belongingness persists over time on account of the druid community having a place to call home, built on not five but six pillars of belongingness (i.e., the core five, plus significance). The perpetuity of druid identity over time is helped by the fact that there are generally no salient threats to their existence. For the Māori people, whereas their belongingness to their homeland has always been a spiritual project, events of the last few decades in New Zealand have given rise to greater vocalization of Māori rights and interests at a national and regional level as a matter of cultural preservation. For some Māori activists, therefore, preserving and promoting Māori identity means entering the political arena and battling for their ancestral homeland.

Belonging-to-place matters for certain communities in contingently significance ways. Belonging-to-place can be a matter of spiritual connection (discussed in further detail in the following subsection). Belonging-to-place can also be a matter of national pride. Thus, concerns about continuity of identity are implicated in a sense of belonging toward one's country (Kolesovs 2021). The German concept of *heimat* (roughly translating as "home" or "homeland"), which refers to a place of safety, reliability, and deep trust, captures the essence of what drives nationalistic passion. This first sense of place is meant in the

ordinary sense; that is, geographical/physical location, an “underlying structure of placedness that is essential to our being as human” (Malpas 2012: 63). Then there is what Malpas (2012) refers to as “the placed character of our own being as that is worked out in and through the specific places in which we live and move — as our lives are shaped and formed in relation to this place and these places” (Malpas 2012: 64). In this second sense, the notion of place involves the act of *placing oneself somewhere*. Once again, “place” here includes usage in both its noun (a specific geographical location) and verb (i.e., the act of inserting, visualizing, or narrativizing oneself into a space) forms. Thus, when someone speaks of being “one with the land”, what she means is that she belongs to the land as much as the land belongs to her. In other words, the land is an extension of her identity, personhood, and agency.

To feel displaced or out of place, therefore, is to experience possibilities and affordances facilitating homelike experiences as unreachable and unavailable (Ratcliffe 2023a: 4). To make a distinction between being in place and being out of place, consider the following passage:

> “[B]eing in place is not just a question of where we are, but also where we are not. It is a matter of where we can be and where we cannot. It also alerts us to the fact that we are never not in some place or other. Being out of place is when we are not accepted (or permitted to be) where we currently are. This may mean we have to go home to our proper place. However, there may be no place where we are accepted, where we are properly in place. We may have no place that is properly *ours*, even as we remain somewhere. But in this condition we are not located, not secure, because we are not entitled to be there.” (King 2015)

Accordingly, being out of place is anxiety-inducing. One’s standing there is precarious and vulnerable. At any given moment, one could be cast out and driven away. The rug could be pulled from under oneself without warning. One is always somewhat on edge, being on the *precipice* of belongingness. Conversely, being in place means the place is *mine*; but it is also a place that is *yours*. Thus, a place of shared belonging is very much *ours* (*and* not theirs, as the case may be, delineating boundaries of group-based belongingness). Figuring out what one stands, in relation to similar and dissimilar others, in places of shared belonging, requires mutual accommodation – and accommodation here has a double meaning: making allowances (for someone/something), and a dwelling-space. Both meanings are indelibly

intertwined. When you make room for someone, you are accommodating them—providing them with space—to be and to do as they please. The reverse is also true: lack/loss of a place to stay/live threatens one's existence (demolishes one's pillars) in ways that could cause hostility and conflict to arise.

When belongingness to place becomes a matter of survival, things can get heated and hostile in the blink of an eye. People get sentimental and nostalgic about places. Places that matter hold deep personal significance – sentiments shared by others and felt collectively. Places strongly associated with shared group identity evoke strong emotions. According to Alberti, "[a]ll emotions are political: as rhetorical devices, as social entities, and as ways of organizing social and political relationships" (Alberti 2019: 229). Szanto and Slaby (2020) qualify this further, explicating political emotions as "collective emotions that disclose a shared concern of political import, claim public recognition and affectively and normatively modulate the emotional life of the members of a polity" and mediated by "collective affective intentionality" (Szanto & Slaby 2020: 479), providing an explanandum for the realm of experientiality located where the affective meets the political.

Political emotions pervade collectives and communities of agents with shared interests in matters of significance to them, *disclosing* what motivates their participation in political activities and the formation of norms and beliefs, and about what ought to be done to achieve shared goals – often relating to carving out a slice of the geographical landscape and staking one's *foothold* there. Political emotions underwrite the drives and impulses to lay claim to a specific *somewhere*: a place of shared community identity and values, rooted in history and tradition, where you and others like you can belong and thrive.

4.2.2 Belongingness as Place for Spiritual Connection and Self-Actualization

Place is political. Place is also spiritual. In fact, with respect to belongingness, the political and the spiritual are flip sides of the same coin: a deeply personal values system, one that is intrinsically linked to one's sense of identity and agency. The political is an outward manifestation of these values, and the spiritual is an inner journey to embody these values. Values take form

in both the realms of intersubjectivity (through reification) and intrasubjectivity (through instantiation). Values do not exist in a void; they are defined by the spaces within which individuals live their lives and call home. Values solicit participation and commitment – and to participate and commit, place in required. Place invokes a sense of pride – one shared by others, and one often shared *with* others. Place permits personal growth in a Maslowian sense – somewhere to base oneself and pave the way for one's life plans to unfold. Place also provides warmth and stillness – somewhere one can form a deep connection and communion with, a place equal parts ethereal and ineffable.

Ultimately, place is deeply affective, as we have already established. There is much at stake in establishing one's place in the world. Place is a vortex for shared memories and co-feelings to form and reside, a repository for stories to be told, and the fabric upon which one's life is threaded and woven. Place is a canvas for meaning to be painted. Alternatively, place may be a treasure trove of meaning waiting to be mined or excavated. Ultimately, place is always located somewhere. Therefore, in displacement, there is also *dislocation* – indicating that something is broken and needs fixing.

An unbelonging existence is a broken existence. For some versions of belonging-to-place, displacement means disconnection from a place that has always held special (perhaps even spiritual) meaning, purpose, and significance. Thus, experiencing displacement can mean experiencing unbelongingness in certain cases, *even though* the five core pillars remain intact. Whereas the five core pillars are relatively straightforward to grasp, the pillar of significance is marked by a certain level abstruseness and inscrutability. To help articulate the significance of place to various forms of belongingness, and what it feels like to hold such sentiments, let us defer to the notion of spiritual feelings as expressed by Scheler to guide the way forward.

Taking heed from Scheler's hierarchy of values (Scheler 1973), a taxonomy classifying values ranging from the material to the spiritual, accompanied by corresponding states of affectivity, we can infer that values of self-actualization and self-transcendence are associated with spiritual feelings (Cutting 2016). Scheler's framework, which proposes that values are perceived (introspected) through feelings, aids us in illuminating how place (and belongingness thereof) simultaneously implicates both highbrow concepts (such

as enlightenment) and deep emotions (such as bliss). The following table sets out a range of values with their corresponding feelings and feeling-states (arising from the perception of values), as proposed by Scheler:

Hierarchy of Values (a priori and material)	Feelings (receptors of value)	Feeling States
Spiritual values: The beautiful and the ugly Right and wrong Knowledge of truth	Spiritual feelings	Bliss and despair
Psychic values: Well-being and ill-being	Psychic feelings	Hunger and disgust Delight and guilt Joy and sorrow
Vital values: The noble and the vulgar The excellent and the bad Well-being and ill-being	Vital feelings	Health and illness Strength and weakness Life and oncoming death
Sensible values: The agreeable and the disagreeable	Sensible feeling	Pleasure and pain

Table 2. Scheler's Hierarchy of Values and Feelings (Scheler 1973).

Scheler theorized that an agent's emotional life is stratified in a particular hierarchical order. At the base of this table (see above) lies "sensible values" which are perceived as pleasure or pain. At this lower end of the scale, values exist along an agreeability spectrum, and can be said to correspond to primal urges. On the second and third rungs of the hierarchy lie "vital values" and "psychic values" respectively, pertaining to health and well-being, and speak to our existential concerns such as nourishment, satiation, and flourishing. These three sets of values permeate all five core pillars of belongingness (safety, familiarity, freedom, acceptance, and trust) in creating homelike conditions.

At the apex of this hierarchy lies "spiritual values" which are perceived as bliss or despair. At this higher end of the scale, values exist along spectrums pertaining to beauty, virtue, and truth, tapping into our potential for perceiving that which is transcendental and metaphysical. These spiritual values define

certain communities built on ideological goals and objectives; for instance, religious sects/cults that instil a strict code of conduct. Unlike sensible values at the bottom, which "can be localized precisely, and therefore, very importantly, they can be more easily controlled and manufactured (for instance, by commercial or political campaigns)" (Altamirano 2021: 25), spiritual values reflect higher order aspects of the human condition which demand committed adherence. It is these higher order aspects of the human condition where one finds extended experientiality of a transcendental, ethereal, and ineffable nature that makes certain aspects of belongingness significant and meaningful. Based on Scheler's taxonomy, we can ascribe spiritual feelings and associated bliss to lived experiences—either solitary or social—in places properly scaffolded (furnished with *six* pillars) for agents' specific existential needs such that they can be living embodiments of the (higher order) values they subscribe to.

Experiences, feelings, and moods pertaining to metaphysical, obscure, or esoteric subject matters often evade scrutiny due to the ineffability of their nature. What Scheler's taxonomy demonstrates is that "we do have (limited) access through language to such evidence" of access to a system of values and their corresponding feelings through introspection, "since words and definitions provide certain means to explore our inner life and our inner diversity, as well as to communicate it" (Altamirano 2021: 26). The choice of words in descriptions of lived experiences can be rather revelatory – providing insights into the spiritually-tinged emotional lives of agents in their natural social environments. By employing this Schelerian analysis of the emotional life, we can appreciate how there exists values that transcend the realm of the material/physical.

In view of place affording spiritual forms of belonging and experiences of bliss, a case can be made for the *transpersonal* (and not just the interpersonal) being fundamental for positive mental health and self-esteem outcomes for certain agents. In a realized state of spiritual-belongingness, an agent arguably speaking has full reign over her identity and agency – capable of discerning value propositions and deciphering meaning. Accordingly, a la Scheler, "individuality becomes possible only through the proper identification of the different ranks of value" (Altamirano 2021: 23). An agent's individuality leaves imprints on the range of values that underpin her relationship with her environment: imprints that may invariably be described as experiences of bliss

and awe. To this end, the Schelerian classification of bliss and despair—representative of values at opposite ends of the spectrum of human affectivity—as spiritual values provide a window into the ineffable aspects of belongingness implicated in the additional pillar of significance.

Now that we are done with bliss, let us dive deep into despair. A detailed analysis of the emotion of despair, that is. Despair can be described as a deflated sense of hopefulness, a state where dread begins to seep into the emptiness felt within oneself. Despair, experienced as spiritual disconnection and unbelongingness from home/land/homeland, implicates feeling *inessential* – i.e., that you do not *matter* (and nobody cares). To no longer be part of something greater than oneself constitutes the kind of unbelongingness that can crush one's spirit. In these forms of displacement, the core five pillars are insufficient to prop up spiritual connection to home/land/homeland that matters. Consider, for instance, the spiritual disconnection experienced by Tibetan monks exiled from their homeland. To overcome the despair of spiritual disconnection, exiled Tibetan monks become members of local Tibetan communities and participate in their rituals and events, in an effort to re-establish some semblance of what once was. Rituals remind you of the traditions you practiced in your homeland – rituals which, if carefully curated and replicated, can provide a spiritual lifeline in a home away from home. Rituals, properly practiced, act as beacons signalling to others where spiritual communities of belongingness exist in new homelike places away from home.

Indeed, rituals and beliefs matter "to engage in spiritual perception, both in the sense that these beliefs and practices prepare one to spiritually perceive and, in the sense, that these beliefs and practices are involved in the act of spiritual perception itself" (Spencer 2022: 59). Cultural practices may take the form of rites; for instance, initiation practices at clubs, the *pōwhiri* (welcoming ceremonies) conducted on *marae* (sacred Māori communal places), and so forth. Participation in such practices is valuable for bonding purposes amongst community members. For Māori individuals, cultural events and activities on *marae* reinforce their belongingness to their homeland and their standing in relation to the world. Performing a *hongi* (traditional Māori greeting where both parties press their foreheads together) is a standard greeting when welcoming guests onto a *marae*, or as part of a pōwhiri. Of course, these norms and rituals

are second nature to those in the know – those raised in and acquainted with cultural traditions passed down generation after generation, practiced regularly within the bounds of community. Rituals are practiced seamlessly through communal spiritual perception. In the company of others in the know, one knows *what* to perform and *how* to perform. Shared experiences of cultural and spiritual significance which bring members together in one's homeland, when properly mimicked and mirrored, may have the potential to bring together displaced agents of varying kinds (ranging from expats to refugees) in new homelike spaces in foreign lands. Spaces in which identity-conscious and place-sensitive agents interact seamlessly are scaffolded with actionable possibilities for the tangible (e.g., familiar objects, trusted others) to intertwine with the intangible (e.g., beliefs, dreams, hopes), creating potentialities for place/culture/identity-bound feelings and experiences of significance to proliferate in perpetuity.

Consider how for the Māori population, cultural identity and national identity are synonymous. Therefore, in the context of New Zealand, it is perhaps unsurprising that Māori tend to report a stronger sense of national belonging than non-Māori do (Moradi 2019: 300). For Māori individuals who live overseas (for example, in Australia, where the largest Māori population outside New Zealand resides), it matters to them to ensure continuity of practice of rituals and traditions: to maintain and celebrate their identity, to feel a sense of solidarity in the company of other Māori, and to perpetuate a sense of belonging, by participating in the activities of a Māori expat collective where one exists. Hence, Māori maintain their sense of belonging by being proactively engaged in activities that reinforce their cultural identity – for example, partaking in a *hāngī* (a communal feast featuring various cuts of meat and root vegetables such as potatoes and *kūmara*, a variety of sweet potato native to New Zealand, comprising traditional Māori cooking methods using heated rocks in a pit oven in the ground), singing *waiata* (traditional songs), and attending other social gatherings where opportunities abound for a *korero* (convivial and heartfelt discourse): experiences that hold particular significance within the geographical confines of New Zealand, which Māori exclusively call their home.

Hence, for identity-based belongingness—as exemplified in the case of the Māori people—it is *what you do* that makes you belong. A shared existential

crisis that several indigenous cultures around the globe face is the extinction (or as the case may be, erasure) of their cultures and identities. Thus, for Māori individuals and other members of indigenous cultures, their belongingness is practiced regularly and ritualistically. Maintaining one's identity and way of life in an ever-changing world is necessary for personal empowerment and knowing one's place in the world. In New Zealand, efforts have been made over recent decades to preserve and promulgate Māori culture through the funding of creative projects, mentorship programs, tourist initiatives, and other measures to ensure New Zealand continues being a place—indeed, the *only* place—where Māori can and will always belong to, forever and a day.

Practices and rituals that are personally meaningful and spiritually significant afford homesick agents some semblance of a grip on belongingness in places beyond one's homeland: homelikeness away from home. Consider how, for instance, visiting local temples and popular restaurants to get a taste of home away from home allows expats of Chinese heritage to maintain a footing on their cultural roots and identity, in whichever new city they are domiciled in. Communion with others with whom you have a shared sense of identity—co-experiencing the sprit or *essence* of what brings participants together—activates ineffable aspects of belongingness that can only be described as metaphysical and transcendent in nature: belonging through shared spiritual feelings of *oneness in togetherness*. Spiritual feelings derive from being a collective person: a member of a community whose participation in shared activities and events meaningful to the whole community contributes to the overall project of unity and solidarity.

The experientiality of a collective person, in a Schelerian sense, may be framed in the following terms: "an acting subject that is a community, which encompasses the individual: I experience the subject of some of my acts (such as acts of collective responsibility) not as this individual person but as a community, such as my family or nation, that encompasses me and other members" (Spencer 2022: 61). Moreover, spiritual perception is fully realizable only in communities of collective persons who are "given to themselves" and who "act towards the various spheres [of experience], can be open to the highest values, and are primarily organized around or oriented to the realization of some value family" (ibid.). Spiritual belongingness in such communities is

characterized by a certain unspoken knowing of *how to be*. Moreover, "a spiritual feeling like loving touches the core of reality in a way that psychophysical feelings do not— though they are both relations to value" (Steinbock 2021: 24). Falling in love with a new city on one's travels, for instance, may be described as a kind of spiritual feeling of oneness with a place. Perhaps one felt a particular connection with locals at a yoga retreat, or a sense of grandeur on invigorating walks across the cityscape. Moreover, as we "experience ourselves being shaped and transformed by another, especially in transformative ascetical and mystical experiences", we in effect "'enact' our spiritual acts—that is, we 'become' them or 'flow' into them, such that we are wholly taken up in them (though still in such a way that we can always perform further acts)" (Spencer 2022: 63). For certain agents, such spiritual feelings tied to place represent the *lifeblood* of belongingness – the lack or loss of thereof placing these agents at heightened risk of adverse mental health outcomes.

4.2.3 Illness and the Erosion of Meaning

Displacement makes the precariousness and fragility of life ever more apparent. Recalling Hobbes' somewhat pessimistic quip that life in its natural form is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1968/1651: 186), there is admittedly a kernel of truth in this observation, especially in times of socioeconomic uncertainty and geopolitical upheaval. Experiences of dissociation and detachment from one's environment can invoke feelings of emptiness: the sense of being vacant and listless. Other emotions come to mind too, such as *weltschmerz*: weariness, forlornness, or melancholy at the perils of the world and pitfalls of modern life. A pessimistic outlook on life is thus often linked with a compromised immune system and a poor state of health.

Now, it may be said that there is a plethora of reasons to be pessimistic about the times we currently live in. What could be more disconcerting than feeling like the place you have always called home no longer appears homelike to you. A place that was once an extension of you now *otherizes* you. And a place that otherizes you causes defamiliarization, potentially rendering you ill. Illnesses pertaining to this particular mode of unbelongingness warrant further investigation, and Svenaeus (2011) offers the following prescription: "a

phenomenology of illness can be carried out through highlighting the concept of otherness in relation to meaningfulness", where "[o]therness is to be taken here as an unfamiliarity, a foreignness, that permeates the ill life" (Svenaeus 2011: 334). An othered life that ceases to be homelike can indeed make one feel ill.

To get a grip on the lived experiences of the unbelonging agent, it is essential that we examine how she sees the world from within – from the inside out, so to speak. The nature of the relationship an agent has with the world provides phenomenological context necessary to make sense of the unhomelikeness. With respect to displacement, we can frame this phenomenon in terms of its illness-like effects. Navigating a public space that is no longer (encountered as) safe or familiar can be *dizzying*. Discovering breaches of trust in one's social network can be *spine-chilling*. Dealing with new company policies or government legislation regulating free speech can be *nauseating*. Encountering a proliferation of racist graffiti and antisocial behavior in one's neighborhood can be *stomach-churning*. And so on and so forth.

In each instance, displacement causes disruption in how time is experienced, causing "an alienation of past and future, whereby my past and future appear alien to me, compared with what was the case before the onset of illness … to the point that the past and the future appear in a new light—or perhaps a new darkness—in which they acquire a strange quality of being, simultaneously mine and yet no longer mine." (Svenaeus 2011: 339). This strange quality (of being mine, yet simultaneously not) that Svenaeus speaks of, must surely feel equal parts jarring and numbing: an existential rupture, dispelling one from others and from place, that impinges on one's agency. We can think of "diminished agency as a battle between the bodily and normative sense of agency, with the result that the person becomes unrecognisable to themselves (a 'who am I?' feeling), loses meaning in their actions and feels mechanical and 'on automatic'" (Boden 2018: 60). As a result, the unbelonging individual experiences impaired navigation in the social world due to disruption to sense-making. Spaces are experienced as hostile when they push back on you. Navigating spaces is no longer a seamless process. Taken-for-grantedness gives way to self-doubt and lack of self-assuredness. Alienation thus precipitates an unravelling of functional norms, which are "states of the world necessary for an organism's continued functioning and adaption" and that

“support the organism’s continued self-maintenance and adaption, and by extension, their ability to fare-well in their communities" (Nielsen 2023: 118, 120). Accordingly, the kind of dysfunction pertaining to the breakdown of functional norms fits the description of a mental disorder: “a recurring pattern in sense-making that runs counter to the individual’s functional norms to a significant or atypical degree, disrupting their wider mode of functioning in the world" (Nielsen 2023: 120). Breakdown of this nature renders an agent vulnerable to illness and other threats to personal well-being.

Following this line of thought, unbelongingness can be considered an illness of existential rejection, ejection, and dejection. A place that cuts me off/out is a lonely place *for me (but not necessarily for you)*, one where existential possibilities that are relevant and matter to me feel like they are available to you *but not to me*. There is an acute sense of lack of excess, experienced as “being excluded, blocked, or estranged” (Ratcliffe 2023a: 4). This is exactly what it is like to be an outcast: being thrown out from existential lifelines providing sustenance. The impact this kind of existential disruption has on an agent is mediated by “pre-reflective, dynamic patterns of habitual anticipation [that] shape all of our experiences, thoughts, and activities”, with certain kinds of unfulfilled expectation generating “disappointment, relief, surprise, and bewilderment” (Ratcliffe 2023a: 4). Unfulfilled expectations may cause decoupling from one’s environment, experienced as being flung out and tossed away – a traumatic life event draining meaning out of one’s life.

A life devoid of meaning is one in which an agent likely struggles with being/feeling happy, healthy, and hopeful. Nevertheless, we are imbued with *conatus*: the will to live, and to keep on living. Perhaps we can draw strength from seeing that “the universe has meaning for life forms because of the way they are shaped to keep trying to live in an imperfect world” (Nielsen 2023:60). In other words, meaning is created in our attempts to make sense of where we are in the world and how to make the most of it. As beings thrust or thrown into the world, we enact—bring forth—meaning in our interactions with our environments, then try and makes sense of how best to survive – to the best of our abilities, with the tools and resources at our disposal.

Conversely, inability to enact meaning compounds one’s dissociation and disconnection from the world; at the severe end of things, culminating in

unceremonious expulsion from a homelike existence where one's best efforts to maintain oneself in a given environment have proven futile. In a state of estrangement such as this, meaninglessness arises (van Tilburg 2021). The agent becomes unresponsive to the environment in the same way that the environment has been seemingly unresponsive to her. The paucity of engagement goes both ways. Unbelongingness can take two forms: the world pushing you away, and you pulling back from the world. In some cases, both effects occur in tandem. Disclination to participate causes one to withdraw from a world that ceases to be meaningful. A world that fails to afford an agent the requisites existential goods to survive and thrive hardly elicits participation.

To sum up, an unbelonging place may be experienced as *existentially deficient* and therefore lacking in possibilities for meaning-making and meaningful lived experiences to arise. The unbelonging nature of the place is made ever more evident and prominent, by way of observing how the place appears attuned for others and their seamless actions *but not for me* (Ratclife 2023a: 5). An agent cannot participate meaningfully in a space which fails to adequately recognize or accommodate her presence. An unbelonging place therefore feels like one which pushes you away and rattles the pillars with which you have built your homelikeness. Moreover, a place devoid of meaning, meaningfulness, and meaning-making opportunities is encountered as empty, lifeless, and soulless. The ennui and melancholy from such an insipid existence may, in severe and chronic cases of unbelongingness, metastasize into concerning behavioral and health outcomes; for example, being drawn into toxic social spheres of belonging. With this in mind, the following section examines where paths through realms of sociocultural unconventionality may lead unsuspecting agents simply wishing to belong somewhere.

4.3 Toxic Forms of Belongingness

In the milieux of integrations, disintegrations, and re-integrations of social relations along with the myriads of personal connections, disconnections, and

reconnections playing out in public social spheres, there is much to learn, unlearn, and relearn. From time tom time, belongingness unravels and breaks down; and when this happens, agents with unmet existential needs may be tempted to look further afield for a sense of belonging, having exhausted other attempts to belong to more conventional and mainstream groups/communities. To this end, this section focuses on the negative outcomes of prolonged social withdrawal: firstly, by identifying the conditions which give rise to these individuals' attraction to groups with potentially radical, destructive, or hateful beliefs and goals; secondly, by examining real-life examples of what I shall refer to as toxic forms of belongingness (e.g., gangs, religious cults, extremist political groups, etc.); and thirdly, by identifying the main features of toxic belongingness, based on an analysis of selected case studies. I conclude this section with a summary of the social and psychopathological implications for excluded, rejected, alienated, and ostracized individuals whose struggles to belong take dark turns down forked and windy paths.

In the following analysis of what could possibly go wrong when belongingness breaks down and subsequent attempts to belong fail, I propose four different kinds of toxic belongingness that could emerge:

- **Fake** belongingness – where an agent pretends to identify with the norms, values, and goals of a particular group or cause for self-interested reasons (e.g., a social media influencer who schmoozes her way into a prestigious and coveted social network).
    - This form of belongingness is toxic on account of disingenuity, inauthenticity, and superficiality. Examples of fake belongingness constitute a milder variant of toxic belongingness, pertaining more to behaviors that may warrant consternation but otherwise have low(er) impact on affected agents' mental health outcomes.
- **False** belongingness – where an agent incorrectly assumes that she shares the same norms, values, and goals with a particular group or cause (e.g., Queers for Palestine aligning with pro-Palestinian groups hostile to the LGBTQIA+ movement – and other examples where some but not all values/norms/goals intersect, creating unnatural and uneasy

bedfellows).[48] Essentially, we have a situation where group identities that do not usually belong alongside one another (e.g., no historical tradition of allyship) are nonetheless "mashed" together into some kind of grand coalition of supposedly shared interests.

    - This form of belongingness is toxic on account of the potential for conflict to arise, given internal ideological inconsistencies that threaten the overall stability and longevity of the alliance.

- **Fringe** belongingness – where an agent acquiesces to the norms, values, and goals of a particular group or cause in the endeavor to feel a sense of significance/purpose/meaning, motivated by a desire for self-preservation due to perceived threats to oneself and one's loved ones.
    - This variant of belongingness is toxic on account of real-world threats posed to civil society. Collectives and communities which form around shared interests on the far edges of society range from the benign (e.g., believers in Flat Earth Theory) to the malign (e.g., white nationalistic movements, radical Islamic groups, etc.).
- **Forced** belongingness – where belongingness is imposed on an agent in such a way that she is compelled by circumstances to go along with the norms, values, and goals of a particular group or cause, even though she disagrees or disidentifies with them (e.g., being raised in a cult, born into a mafia family, and so forth where opting out is not a straightforward exercise of simply walking out of an establishment).
    - This form of belongingness is toxic on account of the harm/loss suffered by the agent who finds herself trapped in a situation beyond her control. Members trapped in closed communities do not access the pillars of belongingness the same way that willing and voluntary members do, on account of the former wanting out.

Note that I use the term "toxic" to describe the detrimental effects that these forms of belongingness may have on the agents, those whom they interact with, and those who have an interest in these matters. Members of society drawn to

[48] For a similar example of the uneasy alignment of pro-Muslim and pro-LGBTQIA+ interests, see the following case of a US city with a Muslim-majority council since 2015 that recently voted to ban the display of pride flags on city property, causing a split among left-leaning residents: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/17/hamtramck-michigan-muslim-council-lgbtq-pride-flags-banned.

these forms of belongingness hail from a variety of different backgrounds and motivations, united and driven by an exigency or desperation in having the pillars of belongingness restored – a drive that sometimes pushes some agents to their limit and to the very edges of mainstream society. Thus, I wish to emphasize that the terminology employed here is by no means a repudiation of these agents as malicious, irrational, or reprehensible.

Rather, the taxonomy presented above is designed to account for how a perfectly ordinary desire to belong can manifest in a variety of ways that drive some agents to dark places. At the edges of mainstream society, one finds a plethora of subcultures catering for all kinds of proclivities. Most are benign, simply catering for a more obscure or niche palate (e.g., the BDSM community, the metalhead community, etc.). Others may have a more malign undertone, perhaps even be engaged in antisocial behaviors; take for instance football hooligans/ultras, neo-Nazi thugs, Antifa protestors, and so forth. In seeking a sense of belonging with such groups/causes, an agent may find herself being entangled with forces and factors that jeopardize her best interests.

In another set of circumstances, an agent may find herself in a situation of *forced* belongingness, being an involuntary and unwilling member of a closed community. Agents forced to belong are most at risk of harm to self, seeing as access to the existential goods they seek are contingent on their continued membership to the respective groups from which they intend to disassociate. Despite the associated challenges, the end goal for this type of agent is to *unbelong* to the group she is already a member of (probably due to circumstances beyond her control). In the endeavor to shine a light on this intriguing phenomenon of forced belongingness, I present a case study on the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs), a Christian sect that has all the hallmarks of a religious cult and therefore will be referred to as such (for reasons that will become clear shortly). The JW case highlights the polarizing effect some extreme forms of group-belongingness can have on its members. Moreover, the JW case presents a unique situation where it is the drive to unbelong rather than belong that motivates the agents to act accordingly.

There are, broadly speaking, three possible outcomes for the socially withdrawn: (a) reintegration back into society, for example where those working from home exclusively through Zoom calls during the height of the Covid

pandemic gradually wean themselves back into working at the office again (we can call this a positive outcome); (b) continuation in a state of limbo, such as in the case of the *hikikomori* whose social isolation and self-imposed confinement continue without any sign of abatement in sight over a considerable period of time (we can call this a neutral outcome); and (c) degeneration of one's psychological state of affairs to such an extent that incessant negative thoughts and antisocial behaviors develop, for example in going down various conspiratorial rabbit-holes through excessive online browsing and becoming involved in violent hate groups (we can call this a negative outcome). With the framework of analysis proposed above, by way of a taxonomy of toxic forms of belongingness, let us begin our investigation into cases of toxic belongingness by making sense of what makes these variants appealing to certain agents.

4.3.1 The appeal of toxic belongingness

The function of interest groups is multifaceted. At a more superficial level, they attract members who simply wish to meet others with similar interests (e.g., LARPing communities for those passionate about live action role-playing). At a deeper level, interest groups exist to promote certain values, beliefs, and goals, based on certain shared ideals and ideologies. Most ideologically driven groups operate within mainstream civil society, cause no harm, and attract ordinary citizens. However, certain groups adhere to ideologies that a reasonable person would deem as extremist. For all intents and purposes, it could be said that a common feature of extremist groups such as gangs, religious cults, and radical political organizations is that they exemplify fringe, rogue, and even harmful and pernicious forms/versions/renditions of belongingness.

From time to time, a lonely person forays into these realms in search for someone—anyone—who gets him. This person is one who has experienced regular and prolonged deprivation of the necessary existential goods for a well-functioning life. As a result, he is likely in a somewhat desperate state. To this end, he may be attracted to seductive-but-nefarious spaces of belonging where the existential goods he needs are accessible. For instance, a young man in an underprivileged neighborhood may find membership to the local gang provides

social goods such as companionship, social status, and a sense of pride. The prospect of being involved in criminality, although never having crossed his mind previously, henceforth becomes an ever-increasing likelihood, especially when the time comes for his loyalty to the gang to be tested several ways (e.g., joining a heist, being the getaway driver, etc.). Herein lies an example of a lonely agent's desire for belongingness leading him astray. The gang he becomes involved in is therefore a form of toxic belongingness, on account of what its members do. Gang-belongingness may confer a sense of comradery and sense of purpose, hence the appeal of gangs, but when the purpose is wrapped up in antisocial behaviors and criminal activities, this is a red flag.

Indeed, the desire for collective understanding and shared meaning drives group formation and in-group loyalty (North & Fiske 2013: 33). A shared sense of solidarity experienced in this group may be unlike anything experienced previously. Take for instance a black youth who has had previous run-ins with law enforcement and feels he has been wronged by what he perceives as racist profiling. He finds himself drawn to Black Lives Matter (BLM) and its goals, joining increasing virulent protests aimed at holding allegedly racist police officers to account and denouncing institutional racism. With other BLM members, he feels safe in their company and an accompanying sense of acceptance. In meeting others who have had similar and familiar lived experiences (e.g., hostile encounters with white police officers, being harassed for apparently no good reason, etc.), he feels free to express his innermost thoughts, trusting that they will have his back when things go south. Over time, shared resentment (in this case, the collective indignation of BLM members against law enforcement) may become more ardent, entrenched, and radical (Miconi et al 2022). This may lead some agents down a potentially dark and dangerous path – for example, involvement in violent activism and other forms of antisocial behavior, culminating in further run-ins with law enforcement, increased disillusionment with society, and descent further down the spiral.

Now compare the scenario above with one where the agent in question belongs; i.e., has her pillars of homelike existence intact. Homelikeness is vulnerable to attack at any given moment – from forces seen and unseen, known and unknown. Accordingly, she will do her utmost to guard her belonging status. How far will she go? Well, that depends. What is at stake for

her? The will to survive, when tested, can produce thoughts and actions previously inconceivable. We saw, depicted in the film *Lord of the Flies* what happens when social cohesion breaks down, resources become limited, and threats (real or perceived) elicit fear in rival interest groups.

The desire to belong may also exacerbate tribalism and the rather cult-like behaviors they exhibit; think of the way Republicans loyal to Donald Trump defend him to the hilt, despite the awful things he had said and done; similarly, Democrats loyal to Joe Biden pretend that he is mentally sound even when he makes nonsensical gaffes on a regular basis, indicative of mental decline and possibly a degenerative neurological disorder (though I wouldn't dare speculate). Here we find an example of a polarized group-belongingness dynamic, organized around competing sets of political interests, where respective adherents "look the other way" in a show of loyalty, solidarity, and dedication to the overall movement and its goals. In the US political scene, presidential candidates tend to be personality cults unto themselves anyway, with their respective supporters' networks operating like fan clubs. Within these social scenes, agents with fake-belonging motives and drives—e.g., chasing personal clout—are likely to ply their trade too. Everyone is simply trying to get a leg up in this world. Betting on the right horse might well pay dividends.

Whether you are a true believer or a good deceiver, inserting yourself into the political arena could be the springboard you need to gain access to the right networks/circles affording enhanced access to the existential goods you require, perhaps even a wider range of goods to satisfy certain predilections and proclivities. A cynical take here would be that certain narcissistic agents, with the right skill set and a dash of good luck, may be able to "scam the system" for their personal and/or pecuniary gain, with any innocent parties getting hurt in the process being deemed worthwhile collateral damage. There is indeed an infinite number of ways in which one can exploit the system and/or others if one so chooses. The question we should be asking is, are certain variants of belongingness particularly vulnerable to toxic interests and influences? If so, which ones? And what kind of damage is done to the pillars?

Sometimes toxic behaviors can start from an innocuous place (e.g., retweeting derogatory comments about political opponents to score brownie points). However, things are prone to escalate quicky. All it takes is one spark

to light a fuse, causing things to unravel swiftly. The events of 6 January 2021 in the US, known as the Capitol attack, is a prime example of how one thing led to another, resulting in the events that unfolded. Fanatical supporters of Trump, eager to demonstrate their fervor for the cause, goaded one another on, creating a compounding effect from which de-escalation became impossible. The Capitol attack is an example of how ideology-driven forms of group-belongingness can give rise to toxic behaviors and lead to negative life outcomes: an ideology based in part on patriotism and nationalism. Lobby groups and movements organized around promoting a nationalistic agenda tend to share similar concerns centered around issues of cultural homogeneity. Perspectives stemming from this worldview tend to exhibit greater hostility toward unknown others (whether they be migrants or refugees, although the latter tend to cop more of the flak and wrath). While there is nothing wrong with being proud of your country (e.g., at a sporting tournament like the FIFA World Cup), there is always a tendency for some to take something just a little too far.

Thus, nationalistic fervor may be framed as taking the depth of feeling toward home/land/homeland in a more organized manner society-wide, such as in fielding candidates for local and national elections, with a view to achieving certain stated political aims. Matters of contention generating polarizing opinion in society tend to give rise to self-organizing clusters and communities of individuals devoted to achieving particular desired outcomes (Finkel et al 2020). Taking a side on such issues pits various forms of belongingness against one another. To belong, in this respect, means proclaiming your loyalty to one tribe over others: loyalty that could well pay off in times of turmoil and tribulation. Existential threats are "reminders of death [that] increase people's liking and support of the groups to which they belong, but decrease liking and support for opposing groups" (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 348). Perhaps this is all too obvious. *Having others have your back* is one of the benefits conferred by membership in the right social networks and communities of shared goals.

Indeed, gravitating toward trusted and familiar others with whom you feel accepted, safe, and free with, is a natural instinct in moments of fear and extreme stress. Schimel and Greenberg (2013) attribute in-group bias to mortality salience, which "increases perceptions of the cohesiveness of one's group" and "contributes to a sense of group entitativity, the belief that one's

group constitutes a real entity, possessing a real existence" (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 348). Attributing agency to the overall group gives its members reasons to fight for the cause and to protect the group as "its own thing unto itself", so to speak. Furthering the aims of the in-group may mean viewing out-groups with different or opposing viewpoints as hostile and threating; and when confronted by these perceived adversaries, besieged members may act derogatorily and aggressively (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 352). Such are the lengths worth going to for some, in the endeavor to guard and preserve one's belongingness. And such is the precariousness of belongingness, as groups scramble to guard their respective turfs.

The upheaval of the pandemic years created conditions ripe for extremist ideation to take (further) root – magnified in part by increased time spent online; specifically, time spent accessing negative material. Studies have shown that the pandemic exacerbated a surge in worrying online behavior and the proliferation of harmful virtual content (Burkauskas et al 2022; Ammar et al 2021; Király et al 2020). The desire to belong can be a force so strong that it impels an agent to seek solace and kinship in spaces and places beyond the mainstream milieux of civilized society – *whatever it takes* to rectify one's situational unbelongingness. There comes a point in time when feeling socially excluded becomes untenable and unbearable.

According to Williams' temporal model of ostracism, a social excluded agent goes through three stages: reflexive, reflective, and resignation (Williams 2009). At the outset, upon detecting any hint of ostracism, the impact is experienced viscerally and somatically (e.g., a spike in blood pressure, pangs of pain and distress, etc.), prompting aversive action to preserve the things one cares about (e.g., self-esteem, reputation etc.). After the initial panic dissipates, the ostracized agent goes through a period of rumination to makes sense of what has happened and to figure out a way to bounce back from this setback; for instance, strategizing how to become re-included into a friendship group after a period of exclusion (e.g., whether to take an aggressive or reconciliatory approach). Should attempts at re-inclusion or recovery fail, the ostracised agent reaches a stage of recognition of the futility in persisting with certain courses of action, accepts her losses, fortifies her remaining social goods, and reassesses her next steps in moving forward.

In a state of vulnerability or agitation, an ostracized agent is more susceptible to dark thoughts and negative emotions – hence at higher risk of antisocial behavior, extreme violence, and even self-harm (Wesselmann & Williams 2013: 24-25). The ostracized, likely suffering some form of chronic social pain, regularly "struggle with feelings of disconnection, being misunderstood, frustration that their condition is invisible, and not being able to express their difficulties with pain for fear that they will not be accepted" (Borsook & MacDonald 2013: 171), and as a corollary are in urgent need of social participation. From the point of view of agents with chronically unmet social needs, fringe spaces may be their haven.

Imagine an agent who has been left in the lurch in his time of need. He likely experiences lack or loss of control over his life (e.g., being unable to improve his life), causing him a great deal of distress. In virtual spaces, he meets others who have similarly experienced abandonment, ostracism, or estrangement. He soon learns that some regular participants in the online chat rooms are members of an anarchist collective. They invite him to join them in a separate private group chat. As trust, acceptance, and familiarity build over time through further online interactions, he may feel safe and free enough to escalate things by sharing more and further details about how he feels about certain topics and what is bothering him about them. At some point, he may feel inclined to prove his loyalty to the group by participating in their activist escapades. Atop the five core pillars he accesses in belonging to this anarchist collective, he is further imbued with a sense of significance and purpose that which he has yet to experience elsewhere previously. His drive to belong to this group is emboldened in the expectation that he now has others to stand with, who in turn will stand up for him when called upon, putting the "I" back in "tribe".

The human is a tribal being, having evolved over time, through social selection pressures, to "fit in with adaptive, functional groups" in a manner in which "group loyalties not only form quickly but also resist termination (North & Fiske 2013: 32-33). Indeed, several social experiments conducted over the decades have demonstrated that group loyalties and inter-group hostilities develop organically and quickly. In times of uncertainty and upheaval, fearing threats to our lives and way of life, belongingness to a group with pronounced identity-based persuasion and pro-solidarity values may afford us (a) the

protection we seek against a world that feels oppressive, (b) the strength to endure whatever hardships might come our way, and (c) various possibilities for the re-establishment of missing pillars of belongingness – hence the (oftentimes gargantuan) amounts of emotional energy, time, and resources we invest in belonging to these groups *and* ensuring that our membership status is secure. Belonging in all the right places is personally meaningful/valuable, conferring to us certain subjective benefits. There is certainly much meaning/value to be *excavated* in belonging spaces, such that when meaning/value is discovered, and this meaning/value is incorporated into our lives, we will likely do whatever is required, including aligning ourselves with the right groups, to preserve this coveted status in perpetuity. *I mine what is mine to mine and ensure it is mine.*

The coveted status of belonging is, of course, susceptible to loss – loss which may cause the pillars of homelikeness to dismantle. When one's (sense of) home is demolished, one becomes vulnerable to the elements of society. Loss of social standing due to rejection on grounds of identity (e.g. race) can have a particularly deleterious effect on the mental health of youth of minority backgrounds (London & Rosenthal 2013). Rejected and maligned youth are oftentimes filled with rage – a primary driver for seeking out forms of belongingness in groups with potentially pernicious motivations (e.g., vengeance). Feelings of indignation, frustration, shame, and the like, left to linger, breed the kind of resentment that drive some agents into the arms of groups such as gangs, where the social goods they lack can be accessed. Severe deprivation of social goods and the impression that one is being left behind can have a radicalizing effect, the result of which is a propensity for antisocial behavior. Groups with explicit agendas often recruit members on account of a *shared sense of exclusion* (i.e., similar lived experiences of being excluded on account of belief/identity) as well as a *shared desire to exclude* (i.e., to keep those with opposing beliefs/identities at bay). When members of these groups act together, they are imbued with a *surge of significance*: a sense that they matter, that what they do matters, and what they do together with others will make a difference, in furtherance of personal and shared goals.

In sociocultural environments where rival forms of belongingness coexist uncomfortably, the very shackles of exclusion are wielded as weapons in moments of conflict. Members of opposing communities and movements mirror

and weaponize one another's in-group versus out-group behaviors as they consolidate their respective tribal loyalties. Behavioral mimicry of new interaction partners (e.g., fellow members of your new tribal affiliation)—is considered a reasonable response in recovery from social exclusion, "given the links between behavioral mimicry and affiliation, and between social exclusion and the need to restore feelings of belongingness" (Lakin & Chartrand 2013: 269). Loyalty is proven and solidarity is reinforced through participation in shared activities celebrating a common purpose (e.g., showing up at political rallies during a nation's general election cycle), generating shared meaning that becomes layered, sedimented, and embedded into places over time (Borer 2013). Indeed, behavioral mimicry is evident in politically polarizing camps such as pro-Trump versus pro-Biden, pro-Brexit versus pro-Remain, pro-Israel versus pro-Palestine, and so forth, where each side mirrors and reflects their opponents in similarly antagonizing and exclusionary utterances and actions. Evidence of in-group vs out-group behavioral dynamics manifest in a variety of different forms of group-belongingness, as well shall unpack next.

4.3.2 Case studies on fringe belongingness and forced belongingness

When an agent lacks the necessary and sufficient social standing in society, she may feel as though access to certain existential goods is denied. Depleted or diminished existential goods (and lack of access thereof) may fuel thoughts of deprivation. Some disenfranchised agents may have, for instance, lost faith in the system, hence why they take things into their own hands – such as engaging in violent protests and, on the more extreme end of the spectrum, consider joining groups known for engaging in terrorist activities. When public discourse becomes adversarial, and one feels cornered, it can feel like the whole world is against you. Hence, antisocial tendencies may arise when an agent feels particularly threated or cornered, and that he is at his wit's end.

Accordingly, certain communities such as religious organizations and political movements at the extreme/extremist fringes of society tend to attract those who perceive themselves as disenfranchised: discarded by society and despised by others. In response, spaces of resistance against established norms and narratives become ripe breeding grounds for group identities of the

conspiratorial persuasion to emerge, forged on the basis of a shared belief that one's collective identity is under threat from malign forces and interests. In a climate of ideological polarization during the years of Donald Trump's US presidency, the conspiracy group known as "QAnon" garnered much support in the lead-up to Trump's 2020 US presidential campaign for re-election, driven by a belief that there is a cabal of Satan-worshipping, child-trafficking, anti-Trumpers hellbent on preventing Trump's re-election. Members of QAnon were convinced that their vision for America was under threat, and therefore something needs to be done about this, urgently so. Members of QAnon subsequently participated in the Capitol riots of 6 January 2021, where crowds tried to storm the main congressional building, convinced that Trump's opponents had "stolen" the election.

Note how there was universal astonishment that such an event could have even/ever taken place. And yet, this was entirely conceivable, considering how a disenfranchised individual with an entrenched sense of belonging to a particular worldview may snap in extenuating circumstances. Now consider a group of disenfranchised individuals *snapping together*. In the case of the conspiracy-driven group QAnon, its members—being *collectively triggered* in a certain way—behaved the way they did in response to the fear that their country and their way of life faced imminent threats, hence the impetus to vent their frustrations at the establishment in the manner in which they have done. Deluded as they may be, those drawn to conspiratorially driven groups do so on the basis that they have multiple unattainable existential goods – goods which membership of this kind, unlike other kinds, may be able to provide access to.

Certain fringe organizations are characterized by a particular siege mentality (QAnon being one such example, the Proud Boys being another), groups whose actions and activities are instigated based on the conviction that various hostile individuals, groups, or forces are out to get you and fellow members. Controversial, questionable, and shady things have been done in times past in the name of group identity – and for the sake of group continuity. Members of fringe groups will act in ways that preserve what they stand for. To this end, external and internal threats—the former of which has already been addressed—must be minimized or eliminated altogether. Now let us consider how the latter (internal threats) are dealt with. Some measures that may be

implemented to handle internal threats include gaslighting and vilifying critics, quashing internal dissent, conducting witch-hunts of rogue individuals, and eliciting from members reaffirmations of loyalty to the group. These practices have been reported by former members of religious cults who, having harbored second thoughts about their membership to the organization and consequently sought ways to extricate themselves, found themselves suffering reprisals and negative repercussions of various forms.

Leaving a closed community is no straightforward task. Becoming a member of a cult is one thing; leaving is quite another. This tends to be a common feature and indeed hallmark of cults: if you try to leave, others will try to stop you and make your life difficult – thus putting the "cult" back in "difficult" (this pun is very much intended, since it reveals the kinds of *pun*ishment members face if they try to leave or even think about it). Religious cults are closed—and closely guarded—communities which, similarly to radical political movements, operate with a siege mentality. Cult members tend to have low levels of trust in non-members, and even less so with respect to former members, who are regarded as traitors and threats to their cause (e.g., the possibility of exposing sensitive information, shady practices, and egregious behaviors). Accordingly, former members of the Church of Scientology have reported being subjected to harassment, intimidation, and bullying after having left the religious organization.[49] The Gloriavale Christian Community, a secretive Christian cult based in a remote region of New Zealand, which has come under scrutiny in recent years thanks in large part to investigative journalism,[50] [51] instils fear in its members with proclamations that they will face eternal damnation if they dare to leave.[52]

A similar fate befalls members of the Christian cult[53] that is the Jehovah's Witnesses ("JWs"), whose members are subjected to strict codes of conduct

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[49] URL = <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/scientology-makes-life-a-living-hell-for-former-members/41187202>.

[50] URL = <https://tvblackbox.com.au/page/2023/02/14/new-documentary-exposes-the-secrets-of-new-zealands-gloriavale-secret-cult/>.

[51] URL = <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/escaping-utopia-tvnzs-gloriavale-documentary-revisits-the-secretive-community-the-front-page/O5CEVGXKVBHSPNEYIEQPSAWYUM/>.

[52] URL = <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxnbd9/people-being-programmed-inside-new-zealands-gloriavale-religious-cult>.

[53] For perspectives on why the JW religious organization may invariably be classified as a cult, see Rhodes (2001), Gomes (1995), and Hoekema (1963).

through sophisticated systems of thought and behavioral control (Penton 2015: 120). Baptized JW members who violate core tenets of the faith are threatened with a form of collective punishment known as "shunning", where un-obedient members are unceremoniously excommunicated from the JW organization via a public announcement during a church service (known as a "meeting") and thereafter ostracized and rejected by everyone they once knew (including family members who remain in the cult). Members of the JW cult often have no strong ties with the outside world, being discouraged from forming long-term and meaningful friendships with those who do not share the same faith. Thus, when formers members are shunned (through a practice called *disfellowshipping*), they are totally cut off from any form of community and sociality (Penton 2015: 119), leaving them in a precarious position of having to (re)build new lives and connections for themselves, often from scratch and with little to no support. Many ex-members end up returning to the fold, as they find life in the outside world without a viable community untenable and unbearable. Thus, a key driving force binding the JW community together is the threat of punishment (excommunication) meted out to those who dare to leave, hanging over them constantly like a guillotine or Sword of Damocles. Religious cults, much like conspiracist movements[54] and other fringe groups do, exploit the insecurities and fears of the vulnerable and impressionable. It's a big bad world out there; stick with us, and you'll be just fine. (Actually, just do as you are told anyway.)

Grandiose exaltations of deliverance from evil and great transformations awaiting us all are enticing future prospects, certainty if you are feeling particularly lost in life, hard done by, or in need of something to believe in and grasp onto. This is generally the allure of cults and other closed communities, speaking from personal experience being raised in a JW family. The JW organization has been described as "apparently non-hierarchical; fraternal and egalitarian in spirit; and in the implications of the future world order that it promises, it is as radical as a thorough-going communist party in its proletarian, rational, anti-nationalist, and anti-racial emphases" (Penton 2015: 351). What reads like a scene from George Orwell's dystopian novel "1984" sounds like paradise to some. Indeed, it is the core JW doctrine of Paradise Earth—a

[54] For an empirical study on the social factors (such as stigmatization and ostracism) driving uptake of membership to conspiracy communities, see Phadke et al (2020).

future Garden-of-Eden-like utopia where those who survive Armageddon (God's Judgment Day of culling wicked humans) are rewarded with Everlasting Life (Chryssides 2022: 159-162; Penton 2015: 279)—that drives membership recruitment and retention. Indeed, attaining access to Paradise Earth is a glorious and significant achievement warranting acquiescence to an ascetic life.

Rewards must be earned. Loyalty must be proven. Hardships must be endured. Thus, JW members are taught the value of sacrifice. The quid pro quo for obedience and compliance—giving up a whole host of recreational activities and fleshly indulgences—is the reward of having the pillars of belongingness installed in their lives. For many JW members, this trade-off is worth it. Living in a closed community means letting go of personal desires – similar to how a monk devotes himself to a life of renunciation living *alone together* with other monks in a closed community (i.e., the monastery). An assiduously regimented and structured life, without the usual bells and whistles, leads to flow-on benefits – or so JW members are taught:

> Many riches await those who are prepared to sacrifice their metaphysical curiosity and personal innovation for the public symbolic system that has stamped its authority on every member of the congregation. In Durkheimian terms, success in the world is incompatible with the given categories of truth in which the internal consciousness of the private person matches that of the collective whole. Witnesses who spend the most number of hours in ministry work and become pioneers or elders are admired and respected for their loyalty and commitment. Individuals derive satisfaction from the knowledge that the community has benefited spiritually from their efforts, while personal success is considered self-indulgent. (Holden 2002: 31)

In other words, the lack of freedom to pursue personal interests is compensated with accolades, platitudes, and confelicity that you are indeed making a difference to the overall cause.

Thus far, we have considered perspectives from members of closed religious communities wishing to leave (the desire to *unbelong* and *dis-belong*[55]), as well as perspectives from former members who have left and suffered various negative outcomes (the consequences of *dis-belonging*). Now

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[55] To "dis-belong", a neologism I introduce here, means "to untether, extricate, distance, and dissociate oneself *from* that which you belong or belonged to" – describing not just an unbelonging desire or motivation but also implicating elements of (feelings of) disgust and dismay, coupled with contempt and resentment, *toward* that which you belong or belonged to.

let us consider perspectives from members who *do* cherish and value their membership of these organizations. Durkheim (1954/1912) proposed that religious community life provides emotional security through rituals reinforcing social bonds and collective conscience. A way of life oriented to the sacred provides a pathway to transcendence from the mundane, the profane, and the humdrum of ordinary everyday life. Such is the appeal of religious cults like the JWs. To this end, JW membership—for those enthusiastic about and dedicated to the cause—provides access to the full gamut of the pillars of belongingness:

- JWs feel *safe* from the outside world they view as wicked and evil.
- JWs *trust* no-one outside of their fold (and that will do just fine).
- JWs access *acceptance* amongst their own (and that will suffice).
- JWs share *familiar* norms, values, and beliefs (and rituals thereof).
- JWs feel free to practice their faith in the company of fellow members.
- JWs are imbued with a sense of significance as chosen members of a grand and lofty cause.

Belonging to the JW community makes sense particularly for members who are suspicious of modernity and yearn for divine guidance to navigate life's adversities (Holden 2002: 11). Some agents are particularly fond of the minimalism and practicality of the JW faith that dispenses with esoteric and superstitious rituals more commonly associated with other Christian denominations like Catholicism (Penton 2015: 351). Simplicity seems to be key here, a valid adaptive response to a complicated and chaotic world.

Now let us further extrapolate what this all means, from the perspective of a loyal JW foot solider of God. Remaining within the confines of a tight-knit community such as this makes one feel *safe*; for example, from Armageddon (God's Judgement Day), which JWs believe is imminent (JW teachings state that humanity is living in "the Last Days", a scare-tactic spouted since the early 20th century to keep members committed and loyal); thus, maintaining a grip on one's faith means God will eventually save them from destruction. Norms and beliefs are *familiar* and offer comfort. Cult members find *acceptance* nowhere else but in the company of fellow JWs. Thus, there is a strong sense of internal *trust*. And within these JW spaces, members feel *free* to express their views without being ridiculed. All these pillars are dismantled when a JW member is

shunned. This is a perturbing prospect that acts as an in-group behavioral/emotional regulatory mechanism (i.e., mind-control technique) aimed at curbing any temptation one may have to leave the fold.

The JW cult practices strict separation from society – exemplifying a closed community that prides itself in *standing apart* from the rest of the world, deemed morally corrupt and depraved. For closed communities more generally, shared identity continuity and internal cohesion are maintained through instilled loyalty to the wider group and encouragement of shared participation in events and activities that may, from time to time, have direct/intentional or indirect/unintentional harm on immediate social networks and wider society; for instance, the adverse emotional impact on relatives and friends who are ostracized for being non-believers or heathens. Thus, while the appeal of membership of closed communities in the eyes of would-be adherents and converts is clear *to them*, the appeal to the rest of us is, in all likelihood, rather bewildering and inscrutable *from the outside looking in*: from the point-of-view of uninitiated observers and critics – not to mention concerned loved ones, social scientists, counsellors, therapists, and others healthcare professionals.

Conversely, for an existing member who no longer wishes to be associated with (belong to) the JW organization, she is likely motivated by a lack and/or loss of enjoyment of the fruits of membership (i.e., the pillars of belongingness are missing *in her case* as a disaffected soon-to-be-ex-member). JW members who want out but feel trapped are known as "PIMO"[56] [57] (physically in, mentally out)—a neologism coined in online (current and ex-JW) communities to describe this phenomenon of remaining (trapped) in the cult but having mentally left the cult already (and thus the desperate search for ways to leave).[58] [59] The first stage of leaving, reconciling within yourself that your entire worldview has been a lie, is an earth-shattering revelation to come to terms (and grip) with; you certainly need to be in the right headspace to make sense of this. Disentangling oneself from a faith, ideology, or belief system that one has invested heavily in, or that one has been brought up in as a *given truth*

[56] URL = <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/PIMO>
[57] URL = <https://www.abbreviations.com/term/2185968/physically-in-mentally-out>
[58] URL = <https://www.exjwcounselling.co.uk/post/ex-jehovah-s-witness-terminology-what-is-pimo>
[59] URL = <https://avoidjw.org/life-stories/pimo/>

about human existence/meaning/purpose, a PIMO would-be leaver faces the daunting task of having to rebuild one's pillars of belongingness on the outside:

- A would-be leaver no longer feels *safe* in the organization, knowing that the elders will be watching her every move. Henceforth, upon leaving the fold, she will have to re-scaffold a sense of safety elsewhere.
- A would-be leaver will likely struggle to *trust* other members, who may feel inclined to report her to the elders as one who is straying from the path: "a lost sheep wandering from its flock", to use proper JW terminology. Lack of trust will likely linger post-departure, as she attempts to establish new connections in the outside world.
- A would-be leaver, having made up her mind to renounce her membership of the JW organization, will need to find a sense of *acceptance* elsewhere after having been disfellowshipped. Her decision to leave means the permanent severing of ties with the only form of acceptance she previously enjoyed – an outcome she can live with.
- A would-be leaver must find a way to cope with the outside world that is wholly lacking in *familiarity* to her, all by herself. She can live with this outcome as well.
- A would-be leaver's most salient gain from being freed from the insular community of JWs is the *freedom* to forge a new life for herself, however daunting this may be.

When ex-members unbelong and dis-belong themselves from the closed communities whence they once belonged, the entire structural foundations of the pillars of belongingness, henceforth having disappeared, need to be rebuilt from the bottom up. Such is the price one must pay; but for ex-members relieved and thankful for having escaped the cult, it sure as hell is well worth it.

Belongingness disintegrates when membership ceases to have personal utility (i.e., unable to fulfil your existential needs). Theologian and sociologist George Chryssides, a leading scholar on JWs, found that the JW organization has a high membership turnover rate: "66 per cent will leave during their lifetime", against a backdrop of 35% of the JW organization comprising members born into the faith (Chryssides 2022: 30). We can surmise that a sizeable proportion of ex-members (leavers) comprise members of the latter

(born-and-bred JWs, like myself). Nevertheless, leaving is by no means an easy feat, as we have witnessed. Cults like the JWs and Gloriavale strip you of all individuality, mandating that you sever any ties you have with the outside world, and rendering you totally dependent on fellow believers.

To this end, we see a kind of *forced* belongingness taking place within the JW cult, where members are tamed, neutered, and kept in line with the ever-present fear of being left out to hang and dry. Forced belongingness—a specific kind of group membership based on *compulsion*—highlights an interesting feature of closed communities: not all members are in there willingly and happily. In fact, some members—often victims of abuse (e.g., sexual assault)[60]—remain trapped in the JW cult, afraid to speak out or seek help.[61] This feature shatters our standard understanding of belongingness as essentially benign and in certain instances even beneficial – hence the toxic and malign undertones of forced belongingness.

The cult-like nature of the JW organization provides researchers with fresh insights into the inner workings of an insular international community that preserves its values, identity, and way of life through rigid control over its membership – members who are discouraged from maintaining lasting social connections with non-members. As a result, long-affiliated members of the JW cult often have few to no meaningful relationships with individuals in the outside world. Unlike other religious groups, JW members tend to have no sense of belonging to any community other than the JW community itself. Like any closed community seeking to instil cultural homogeneity through risk-management norms and rituals (Douglas 1992: 38-54), the JW organization through its leaders ("the Governing Body") decides what boundaries are appropriate for keeping its members in line. Thus, when members leave, often through shunning, they are thrust into a world which affords them few/no familiar social goods, a world that appears and feels totally alien to them.

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[60] Attorneys in America are currently preparing a class action lawsuit against the JW organization for historical cover-ups of instances of rapes, child abuse, and various other sex crimes: https://www.classaction.com/child-sexual-abuse/jehovahs-witness-lawsuit/.

[61] For a recent news story on JWs and sexual abuse, involving the wife (Rebekah Vardy) of a famous UK footballer (Jamie Vardy, a striker who plays for the English Premier League team Leicester City), who alleges that her abuse by an adult JW male as a child was covered up by elders of the JW organization, see: https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/rebekah-vardy-sexually-abused-child-jehovahs-witnesses/.

Shunning has a twofold purpose: to purge the bad apples from the barrels, and to give the bad apples an opportunity to turn over a new leaf (Chryssides 2022: 40). These individuals are, more often than not, maladjusted for a regular/secular life, having been severed from the support network they once enjoyed within the JW cult (probably the only support network they ever had). Whereas they once had a sense of belonging, now this rug has been pulled from right under them in an instant. The sense of belonging, however strong it was, has been revealed as precarious and fragile. Some shunned members struggle to cope in the outside world, devoid of support mechanisms and social ties; thus, many of these individuals harbor a deep sense of resentment at the maltreatment they have experienced.

On 9 March 2023, a former JW member gunned down ex-associates from his local congregation in Hamburg, Germany before taking his own life – reportedly having previously left on bad terms.[62] While reports on the shooter's motives remain inconclusive, former JW members have speculated that shunning may have been a reason for his actions.[63] Assuming this to be true, this tragedy can be attributed to how the sudden loss of one's sense of belonging—one that defined one's entire way of life—can cause an acute deterioration in one's mental health, which in turn may lead to unfortunate consequences. Such is the case for members of religious cults who leave the only social group they have ever belonged to—either voluntarily or involuntarily—and find themselves devoid of an existential safety net.

Without community membership, one no longer has a designated space in which one can *offload* and *outsource* one's fears and insecurities (e.g., experiencing lack/loss of certain existential goods of personal significance). Unbelongingness, like loneliness, is a call to action. Something must be done about this, sooner rather than later. Agents struggling with modern society yearning for structure and guidance are particularly predisposed to being attracted to forms of belonging where the six pillars (such as is the case with religious cults and various other closed communities) exist. Similarly, forced

[62] URL = <https://www.dw.com/en/hamburg-holds-service-for-jehovahs-witness-shooting-victims/a-65041768>

[63] See, for instance, the following online discussion in the livestreamed video titled "TRAGEDY IN GERMANY: Jehovah's Witnesses & the Untold Story of Shunning" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsrLHR8ac9w&ab_channel=ExJWCriticalThinker>.

belongingness compels corrective action to *replace the unwanted pillars with more appropriate ones*. Forced belongingness thus presents us with a special class of examples where group membership of the wrong kind (in this case, the kinds of membership implicating lack of choice in the matter) can have an unbelonging effect – saddling you with the burden of unmet social needs and inaccessible existential goods.

4.3.3 Main features of toxic belongingness

In a state of belongingness, an agent enjoys access to the necessary existential goods. However, belongingness is not a static or permanent state of affairs – it comes apart from time to time. Responses to a lack or loss of belonging vary, depending on what is missing and how the agent is impacted. Two divergent pathways begin to form further along in the process of belongingness breaking down. On one hand, when agents fail to belong, they may *behave badly and/or get things wrong, in the endeavor to make things right*. On the other hand, failure to belong can lead you down a slippery slope toward ill health, on a tangent doing bad/wrong things, or off the cliff entirely where a sad fate awaits you. In this section, I have focused specifically on the latter (with the former to be discussed in the following section on future research possibilities arising from extending and expanding this line of inquiry). Do these two pathways intersect or intertwine at some point in time? Can bad responses lead to bad behavior or associating with bad people, for instance? Again, it depends on *what* is missing and *how* the agent is impacted. Fortitude, tenacity, and resilience are oftentimes in short supply. Moreover, everyone has a breaking point. There is always a straw that breaks a camel’s back.

One of the most desired and sought after existential goods is moral support. Clearly, moral support requires the presence and participation of designated (notably, *trusted*) others. Moral support acts as a cocoon to cradle you through a tough situation. Moral support provides, *inter alia*, such tools as fortitude and resilience, allowing you to enact a sense of hope about better future prospects. If you have access to moral support, or you can otherwise attain fortitude or resilience (through your own means), you have less to worry about. But if not, how long can you cope on your own? What else can be done

about this? Where and/or to whom can you go for solace? How far will you go to make things better? What are you prepared to do to belong again? The path leading deeper into the darkness—where toxic forms of belongingness dwell—is paved with such questions for which there are no easy answers or solutions.

In a state of unbelongingness, there are three typical responses to experiences of social exclusion, rejection, and ostracism: retaliation, redemption, and retreat (Richman 2013: 43). In extremist ideological organizations and religious cults, we witness various forms of retaliation, where agents sometimes lash out—against society at large, or against specific individuals/groups—in abusive and violent ways. Accordingly, extreme social exclusion and extremist ideation could well be, in certain situations, flipsides of the same coin – where desperate times (a chronic lack of belonging) call for desperate measures (extremist ideation), and where retaliation and aggression are often dog-whistles in signalling like-minded others in the milieux of social outcasts. Thus, the pathways of "doing things badly" (in the attempt to belong) and "doing bad things" (to affirm that one belongs) intertwine. The "doing bad things" aspects of belongingness-motivation pervade fringe groups and communities where various counter-cultural proclivities and propensities proliferate: actions designed to beckon greater visibility, representation, social mobility, and other identity-related existential goods that are in short supply.

In a state of chronic unbelongingness, susceptibility to associating oneself with malign individuals and groups is heightened. Spaces in which previously missing existential goods are available, accessible, and attainable sustain and satiate a multitude of different needs. The greater the scarcity and obscurity of unmet needs, the murkier these spaces often become. The motivations and proclivities of members in (and attracted to) religious cults and various extremist organizations can be framed as a desire to address unresolved fears, aversions, and insecurities, in view of the fact that "failure to belong to the modern world … causes some individuals to search for certainty" (Holden 2002: 50). Being deprived of something that you desire will cause an agent to strive to attain it, "by exerting high levels of effort to perform well on tasks" that maximize one's chances of achievement (Stillman & Baumeister 2013: 174). Stakes are high—and heightened—in the face of one's mortality. A

lonely person desires friendship and social connection. A lack or loss of sociality—social exclusion or rejection—is cause for pain to arise.

The avoidance of pain is a desired state of affairs we can all relate to. And the pain here is that of existential dread and suffering: a kind of pain that is experienced at a physical—and not just cognitive—level. Thus, “part of the reason that individuals describe rejection as being painful is because experiences of rejection are processed by some of the same neural machinery that processes physical pain”; and “because of the importance of social connection for human survival, the social attachment system—which ensures social connection—may have piggybacked onto the physical pain system, borrowing the pain signal to indicate when social relationships are threatened” (Eisenberger 2013: 189). Put differently, the capacity to feel existential pain at a visceral level is characteristic of our evolutionary development as a species. And because we feel the pain of exclusion, rejection, and abandonment viscerally, we invest heavily—psychologically, emotionally, financially, and so forth—in attaining, retaining, and maintaining a sense of belonging with others who share our values, norms, fears, prejudices, interests, desires, and goals (yes – the good, the bad, and the ugly).

The foregoing description of belonging-driven motivation certainly rings true for those with a strong sense of identification with closed communities. These agents tend to have a strong aversion to fear, loss, and deprivation, with many having experienced some form of trauma in their lifetimes. Similarly, cult members’ needs for ongoing validation from fellow members make social exclusion and rejection untenable for one’s self-worth and survival (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 352-353). Nobody likes feeling insignificant, a sentiment commonly associated with anxiety and depression (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 353). Then there is shame and guilt, emotions which undermine one’s self-esteem, act as behavioral control mechanisms for keeping members in line and ensuring that they make things right with the group if they have strayed or transgressed (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 355). It should be noted that shame and guilt are often used by the upper echelons of cults to emotionally blackmail their members into conformity and compliance.

The price one pays for violating the mission of the group—like in the case of JWs—is exclusion, rejection, abandonment, and an altogether loss of

the only form of belongingness known to thereafter-cast-out members. Being shunned is an inconceivably bleak outcome for those who are emotionally and psychologically invested in their religious communities – hence why members will do their utmost to acquiesce to the norms, codes, and tenets imposed on them. Obedience and internal cohesion, whatever the cost and sacrifice, are favored in the interests of self-preservation – hence the appeal of religious cults proselytizing promises of protection[64] and deliverance in the eyes of those who struggle to cope in modern society. If membership of a closed community affords you realizable possibilities in overcoming and resolving your fears, aversions, and insecurities, then whatever the associated costs and sacrifices might be are worth it, in your cost-benefit analysis. The inability of a member of a closed community to recognize the toxicity of what this means—when taken to the extreme, further down the slippery slope—ought to be cause for concern.

4.3.4 Possible implications of toxic belongingness

Belongingness can generate both benign and malign behaviors. In the right context, group-belongingness regulates—hence diminishes—aggressive behavior and social tension (North & Fiske 2013: 33). However, in the wrong context, belongingness only serves to exacerbate certain behaviors. For instance, those drawn to political or religious organizations of an extremist nature tend to have a "need for control … so strong that extreme deprivation of perceived control is linked to frightening consequences, such as the first step on the path to becoming a terrorist" (North & Fiske 2013: 35). Belonging to a terrorist organization is, of course, on the farthest extreme end of the scale. Nevertheless, there is cause for concern when we trace the roots of extremist ideological fervor. Upon further analysis, we see that members of terrorist groups often have experienced some form of traumatic life-changing event (or series of events) in their lives that

> shatters the core assumption is that the world is a meaningful place, which includes the idea that one's outcomes are contingent on one's actions. Likewise, in the social realm, exclusion demolishes feelings of social control. Having one's goal-directed behaviors

[64] For an in-depth discussion on the culture of safetyism—an obsession with safety as a response to a world deemed unbearably risky—see Furedi (1997).

> persistently blocked increases frustration, which can cause people to behave aggressively. (North & Fiske 2013: 36)

Indeed, agents who are severely socially excluded—and therefore desperate to belong—are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem and engage in antisocial behaviors (North & Fiske 2013: 36-37), such as terrorist activities. To this end, we can attribute the cause of terrorist activities, such as those which occur in various parts of the Western world, to a breakdown in sociocultural relations signifying a lack of integration – throughout society and in local communities.

Agents drawn to belong to groups involved in terrorist and other violent activities may have regularly and repeatedly fallen through the cracks in society, having failed to mend broken social ties. As a result, "when the possibility of repair is perceived as unlikely, prosocial motives are not activated and instead, antisocial responses predominate" (Richman 2013: 44-45) – hence chronically unbelonging agents being drawn to groups with potentially nefarious goals. The slope of unbelongingness becomes increasingly slippery and precarious over time; the further down the slide, the closer one gets into murky waters and unchartered territory where all kinds of terrors and horrors lurk.

Some variants of belongingness are more obviously toxic in nature; for example, street gangs that cause nuisance to everyday citizens. Other variants of belongingness are more ambiguously toxic; for example, protest movements like BLM, Antifa, and Extinction Rebellion that occasionally engage in violent activities. Yet other variants of belongingness comprise intragroup behavioral dynamics that are toxic only to those on the inside but are nevertheless cause for wider concern; for example, religious cults in which members feel trapped being symptomatic of a more general feature of systems and regimes of top-down authoritarian control designed in theory to deliver better outcomes for all. The case of the JW organization well illustrates a facet of closed-community-belongingness where membership grants you access to all five pillars (sometimes with the supplementary sixth pillar of significance in tow) in ways that other more conventional forms of belongingness fail to do – hence the general appeal of cults and various fringe groups.

At the extreme fringes of society, the drive to belong is colored by a heightened sensitivity to existential threats, such that "the human desires for inclusion and negative reactions to exclusion are most profitably viewed not as

innate reflexive responses but as complex reactions resulting from the potent need to sustain a valued place within a symbolic reality, the primary buffer against the potential for terror engendered by the ever-present knowledge of one's own mortality" (Schimel & Greenberg 2013: 355). Religious cults and sects afford individuals particularly bothered by existential threats, and adequately anxious about their own mortality, a supposed pathway to salvation and reprieve from their pain and anguish. Together with and alongside fellow members, they enjoy shared experiences that provide relief and comfort, and a sense that they are collectively part of a noble and exclusive cause that will (hopefully) pay dividends in due course.

Members of a cult share a similar distrust of and disdain for non-believers, along with a general malaise about the state of world affairs. Similarly, individuals drawn to extremist political organizations often have a dim view of some aspect of society, and in some cases even harbor a deep sense of resentment toward perceived enemies. Politically charged radicals, when mobilized, may have a particular proclivity for engaging in antisocial and even violent behaviors to achieve their political ends. A strong sense of aversion to the world at large (or some component thereof), coupled with a strong sense of affinity to one's cause/faith and fellow believers, underpins the kinds of belongingness found in groups and communities that share radical, extreme, or fringe religious or political beliefs. It is in these subcultures, steeped in the rhetoric of "us versus them", that we find toxic and antisocial behaviors flourish.

In both the religious and political spheres of belongingness, fear appears to be a key motivational factor in members joining groups associated with radical and extremist ideologies. Some members may be saddled with a perceived sense of injustice meted out against themselves and/or fellow members, and harbor latent resentment and hostility against perceived enemies. The dedication of members to their cause may in some cases drive them to partake in acts of sectarian violence and outright hate. This type of extremist is one who seeks *meaning in life and a sense of belonging through fighting for something*. Causes (worth fighting for, in their eyes) can range from the well-intentioned and benign to the caustic and antagonistic. Religious crusader types are particularly salient examples, in view of their dedication to their faith and beliefs which imbue them with a sense that there is something

larger at work, and for which they feel a sense of pride in being part of. Similarly, those attracted to political causes—environmental, pro-family, anti-drug, and so forth—are usually motivated by a desire to improve the world in some measurable and observable manner, based on whatever their ideological prescription for a better world espouses. For ideologically driven agents, belongingness is vested in their values and beliefs, and as such they identify strongly with others of like mind and purpose.

In certain cases, ideological fervor of the political kind can drive extremist sentiment, leading to antisocial and even harmful and deadly behaviors and activities (e.g., violent protests, terrorist acts, etc.). Likewise, ideological fervor of the religious kind can produce undesirable outcomes; for example, inflicting psychological abuse, brainwashing, and trauma on other members of a religious cult. An ideologue finds meaning, purpose, and belongingness in whatever it is she stands for, and is often willing to fight for her cause, whatever it may take. Thus, for those who identify as members of extremist causes, we can classify affiliation to groups of this nature as a form of toxic belongingness on account of potential harm caused by their beliefs, including the propensity for some radicalized members to engage in antisocial and even violent behaviors.

In light of the foregoing analysis, the aim of this section is to delineate specific kinds of toxic belongingness—fringe and forced—for further scrutiny, to make sense of how rather ordinary and uncontroversial motivations (the desire for moral support and companionship, for instance) can lead some unbelonging agents astray into rather malign territory. The desire/need to belong is, of course, absolutely normal and rather ubiquitous. As to where this desire/need to belong leads—on tangents of the unforeseen, and into portals of the unknown—this is where things get rather interesting (and enlightening).

Now that we have chartered a variety of perilous journeys (realized and unrealized) toward destinations of belonging, we have an appreciation of potential pitfalls, threats, and harms that could arise at any given moment. In the final chapter of this work, I conduct an analysis of the key psychological afflictions implicated in experiences of unbelongingness—specifically, anxiety, depression, and suicidality—and survey established and novel therapeutic interventions for alleviating the suffering of agents who feel chronically out of place. But first, let me offer some closing remarks about possible extended and

expanded applications of the taxonomy of belongingness/unbelongingness to other unconventional forms of group-belongingness not covered in this work.

4.4 Future Directions

When belongingness unravels, breaks down, and goes awry, agents will do whatever it takes to make things right; that is, to put in motion the necessary courses of action to restore the missing pillars of belongingness. In some cases, the attempts are successful – for instance, producing a reduction in loneliness or social anxiety (various examples of which were analyzed in the previous chapter). In other cases, the attempts are unsuccessful, leading to divergent paths. One path leads to the pursuit of *unconventional* forms of belongingness in dark corners of society, producing potentially toxic outcomes, as I have examined in this chapter. Another path (as we shall see in the next chapter) leads to increasingly more concerning mental health conditions where unbelonging agents' lives could be at risk.

Utilizing the STAFF framework to assess what kinds of existential risks are encountered by unbelonging agents in their lived experiences, we can examine other cases where unconventional forms of belongingness either supersede less viable and salient forms of conventional belongingness or fill the void left by previous failed attempts to belong. As such, may I suggest new avenues of philosophical inquiry by exploring yet another category of belongingness, "*mistaken* belongingness", to address specific cases where the attempt to belong can lead one astray.

To this end, I postulate the concept of *belonging-in-the-wrong-body*—in the context of gender identity (transgenderism), transitioning (undergoing surgical and/or other procedures[65] to transform oneself from man to woman or woman to man), and detransitioning (undergoing surgical and/or other procedures to reverse the effects of transitioning)—as illustrative of a kind of

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[65] For a discussion on whether children can indeed consent to puberty blockers, and related concerns around safeguarding minors and the vulnerable, see Latham (2022).

mistaken belongingness where a chronically unbelonging agent struggling to find her place in the world, on account of a maligned sense of identity, ends up aligning herself with the relatively closed LGBTQIA+ community *in error*.

In a major development in the realm of gender identity and healthcare, a recent comprehensive independent review in the UK found[66] that a sizeable and ever-increasing proportion of trans-identifying youth change their minds about identifying as trans – some doing so (i.e., desist) while in the throes of transitioning, whereas for others after having already completed the process of transitioning. The takeaway from this is twofold: firstly, that there is something it is like to feel that you are "born in the wrong body", as applicable to trans agents; and secondly, that there is likewise something it is like to feel that you have gotten it wrong (about being "born in the wrong body"), as applicable to detrans and desisting agents. As it currently stands, there is a dearth of scholarship on these related phenomena and their respective motivations.

Given the lacuna in scholarship on both the trans and detrans phenomena, I wish to advance the claim that "*mistaken* belongingness" is a useful conceptual framework for investigating unconventional identity-based forms of group-belongingness (such as the aforementioned). This approach sets foot into novel philosophical territory, adding nuance and depth to a topic that is often subject to impassioned debate and much controversy.

Whereas toxic belongingness explores how you can go from "doing things badly" to "doing bad things", in a desperate quest to belong, mistaken belongingness explores how the "bad" in "doing things badly"—with respect to detransitioning (being indicative of some mistake/error having been made in deciding to transition in the first place)—is a distinct kind of "bad" that is certainly *not* toxic in the ordinary sense of the word and hence does (and indeed *should*) not attract pejorative connotations and implications. Rather, belongingness of the mistaken kind has more to do with "getting things *badly* wrong" – in an *earnest* endeavor to belong and thus restore one's access to the necessary existential goods afforded by the (five/six) pillars of belongingness.

It is this author's hope that, in placing the subject of gender identity within the ambit of group-belongingness and applying a phenomenological framework

[66] URL = <https://cass.independent-review.uk/>

of analysis with regard to the trans and detrans communities, any academic inquiry springing henceforth contributes in constructive and enlightening ways toward the de-escalation of politicized rancor surrounding genuine attempts to interrogate these issues from a position of curiosity, compassion, and concern. Furthermore, should this endeavor yield useful and beneficial outcomes, there is cause for hope for unbelonging agents of various kinds to have their lived experiences acknowledged – likewise in the spirit of curiosity, compassion, and concern. For Science (*and* Philosophy, of course)!

Chapter 5:

Unbelongingness, Adverse Mental Health, and Recovery

Having considered a variety of ways in which belongingness may unravel, break down, and go awry, the psychological perils and pitfalls of unbelongingness—several of which are psychopathologically significant—become increasingly apparent. In a state of unbelongingness, an agent experiences diminished (or aborted) access to the five (or six) pillars of belongingness that provide her with an existential lifeline. Being denied core existential goods, an agent may find her existence in the world rather unhomelike and hence participation therein rather futile. Chronic, acute, or prolonged experiences of unhomelikeness can give rise to symptoms of mental illness. To elucidate the correlation between unbelongingness and psychopathology, scrutiny of the relevant adverse mental health conditions is imperative. In furtherance of this endeavor, the following discussions in this chapter explore features of selected mental health struggles that I believe are prominently implicated in experiences of unbelongingness: anxiety, depression, and suicidality (for reasons that shall become clear).

With this objective in mind, the material presented in this chapter is divided into five sections. The first three sections inspect the intersection of unbelongingness with anxiety, depression, and suicidality respectively. The fourth section examines the role of psychedelics, coupled with the right therapeutic intervention(s), in aiding a patient's recovery, healing, and transformation in the wake of mental illness. The fifth and final section contains musings on what the future holds for belongingness research, in light of the potentialities for positive transformative experiences through therapeutic use of psychedelics in reorientating oneself toward rediscovering a sense of belonging.

5.1: Unbelongingness and Anxiety

Anxiety and depression are two human emotions most commonly associated with adverse mental health. Both anxiety and depression are often co-related medical conditions (self-reports from patients often describe having both anxiety *and* depression). Thus, in popular opinion, it would appear that anxiety and depression might be connected in a rather obvious way. However, this pairing begins to break down somewhat when we scrutinize experiences of unbelongingness. Some agents[67] may be inclined to argue that lack or loss of belongingness is more intuitively associated with (i.e., gives rise to) anxious feelings, with depressed feelings being less obviously implicated in experiences of unbelongingness. Bearing this in mind, this section commences the investigation into the association between unbelongingness and poor mental health outcomes with a survey of existing scholarship on anxiety, before moving onto the (supposedly more surprising) link between unbelongingness and depression (in the following section).

Anxiety, like depression, is a mental health condition targeting temporal events in one's life. The key difference distinguishing anxiety from depression is as follows: whereas anxiety is associated more with events of the future than with events of the past, the reverse holds true with respect to depression (Eysenck et al 2006). Anxiety as an emotion is characterized by excessive worry and tension, reflecting an agent's sense of her future being uncertain and distressing. Glas (2020) describes anxiety as an elusive emotion with "an enormous array of manifestations, ranging from hardly noticeable worries to storms of bodily sensations and from complete paralysis to conditions with severe bodily and mental agitation" (Glas 2020: 36). Worry, stress, and agitation are all symptoms of general anxiety, directed at existential uncertainty: not knowing what lies ahead, how one ought to proceed, who else we might be competing against for scarce resources, whether certain others can be relied on

[67] I would like to thank Tom Roberts for sharing his perspective, which happens to be the flipside of mine (that depression rather than anxiety is more obviously implicated in experiencing unbelongingness), giving me much pause for reflection, introspection, and enlightening journeys through rabbit-holes of inquiry.

in one's time of need, and so forth. Thus, anxiety reveals something about an agent's state of mind or state of affairs. For example, a lonely migrant feeling anxious about her lack of social connections might be duly worried about tenuous access to requisite existential goods to sustain her into the future.

Most relevant to our analysis of unbelongingness is separation anxiety: involuntary disengagement from one's environment, a sense that one is being pulled apart, and that one's life lacks unity and cohesion. Anxiety of this nature reveals "one's vulnerability for being left alone or being *separated from important others*" (Glas 2020: 38; emphasis added). The inclination for social connection to alleviate one's alienation or loneliness leads to frustration when the social world fails to reciprocate. Experiences of defamiliarization and estrangement may ensue, where the strange and uncanny come to the fore. Aho observes how anxiety "captures the background sense of worry, threat, and dread that affectively shades one's experiential horizon *as a whole*" (Aho 2020: 260; emphasis added). Anxiety as an emotion diffuses through one's environment through anxious mood, permeating the structures of daily routines in disruptive ways.[68] Thus, anxiety "not only disrupts our physiological and cognitive timing but also *disturbs the embodied rhythms of everyday social life*" (ibid.; emphasis added). Through experiences of anxiety, therefore, an agent "explore[s] the ways in which human existence itself is a temporally structured event" (ibid.), in the hope that she may find a way to compartmentalize her anxiety in a rationalizable, healthy, and sustainable manner.

More severe forms of anxiety associated with being left behind or aside, hence losing one's place in the world, may point to one's vulnerable standing and grounding in society. Narrative continuity and cohesion is often disrupted in certain cases of unhomelike illness, experienced as "a rift in these stories, necessitating a retelling of the past and a re-envisioning of the future, in an effort to address and change their alienated character" (Svenaeus 2011: 339). Stories of one's life may be altered in such a way that the content no longer feels salient, inducing a sense that one is somehow sick. Feeling like one is

[68] For example, it once occurred to me that "anxiety" happens to be an anagram of "tiny axe", which is how I personally experience and conceptualize anxiety: a tiny axe that slowly but surely chips away at my peace of mind, rendering basic activities performed clumsily and clunkily.

unwell may take the form of *depersonalization*, where an agent feels she is no longer whole or her normal self:

> "The integrity of the self, on this view, is constituted by its narrative unity, by the way in which our future projects and commitments fit or cohere with the meanings of our situation. The capacity to create a story that unifies and holds together this narrative structure is essential for selfhood. But anxiety can undermine this capacity for narrative self-creation." (Aho 2020: 266)

The ill agent, thrown off-course and off-kilter, henceforth seeks a restoration of structure in her life in making sense of how she is able to move forward and re-orientate herself to the world such that she may re-establish a new existential beginning. This endeavor could be fraught with challenges, for the foreignness which engulfs the life of an anxious agent alienates her from the social world, casting her into an unknown future.

Note how a sense of (anxiety-inducing) foreignness mirrors the alienation from the social world as experienced by a depressed agent. The resulting anxiety, following on from experiences of foreignness, is often characterized by alienating meaninglessness "experienced as a breakdown of understanding, which manifests itself concretely as pain, fatigue, nausea, anxiety, and so on" (Svenaeus 2011: 336). Note too that there is "a distinction between people who are anxious about something on the one hand and those who are existentially or globally anxious on the other" (Aho 2020: 260). Accordingly, it is not immediately obvious which kinds of anxiety are more saliently implicated in experiences of unbelongingness, until we are able to pinpoint the object(s) toward which the anxiety is directed.

Perhaps it is the case that everyday feelings of anxiety are more akin to, say, being anxious about mundane matters in one's personal life; for instance, worries about maintaining one's grip on trivial yet familiar daily routines that gives us a sense of grounding – particularly pertinent in turbulent times, when a curveball like the COVID-19 pandemic smacks you right in the face. Thus, an unwarranted, altered way of being-in-the-world can indeed be distressing, since "a constricted future impedes our ability 'to be' because it closes off a range of projective meanings that we would ordinarily draw on to create or fashion our identities" (Aho 2020: 260). Moreover, given that "[w]e exist in the possibilities we project for ourselves, and these possibilities mean something to us on the

basis of the situation into which we have been thrown" (Aho 2020: 261), to be impeded in the endeavor to steer one's ship of destiny, by the forces of nature and society, can feel like being moored and left in the lurch to fend for oneself without the necessary tools for self-preservation – or indeed basic tools simply to navigate spaces without so much as a care in the world, in a taken-for-granted and seamless manner (like we once enjoyed, before shit hit the fan).

In general, anxiety-ridden lived experiences are conspicuously out-of-sync with the seemingly seamless flow of being-in-the-world (Aho 2020: 261). Sufferers of anxiety experience a certain "temporal quickening", where bodily functions and sensations (e.g., breath, heartrate, perspiration, etc.) undergo acceleration (Aho 2020: 262). Cognitive functioning undergoes similar rapidity, particularly by way of thoughts racing through one's mind and a deluge of worries that follows. At such pace, internal cohesion becomes increasingly fraught with *desynchronization*. As Aho observes:

> "The acceleration and disunity of the thought stream makes it difficult to manage and control anxious thoughts. Without the structuring unity of protention and retention, thoughts take on an unrelenting life of their own. And, paradoxically, the more we try to control the thoughts the more powerful they become." (Aho 2020: 263)

Along with disunity of thought, an anxious agent likely experiences lack of control over the trajectory of her life. Lack of control begets disharmony – for example, a disharmonious daily routine. One's habits and habitus unravel, becoming unrecognizable and unreliable. Dysrhythmic behavioral relations with the world begin to take root. Analyzing these disruptions to one's life can "help to illuminate the ways in which the orienting rhythms of our embodiment do not take place in isolation; they are relational and social, already bound up in the wider rhythms of a world that is fundamentally intersubjective or intercorporeal" (Aho 2020: 263). Dysfunctional ways of relating to an environment no longer familiar to you induces feelings of uncanniness. When we say something is uncanny or weird, this could mean bizarre or strange in a puzzling or confusing way; however, weird can also implicate unexpectedly jarring moments and experiences which are unsettling or troubling in a personally disconcerting way.

The spectrum of the uncanny disrupts existential norms that usually provide a backdrop of seamlessness, familiarity, and surety. Anxiety of an uncanny nature "creates a sense of 'time urgency' that disrupts these public

rhythms, as they are generally perceived as being *too slow*" such that "when the agitation becomes extreme, it can shatter the flow of intercorporeal time, resulting in attacks of intense fear and anxiety in public situations" (Aho 2020: 264; emphasis added). From time to time, disruptions to the flow of one's way of life are bound to occur, hence the corrective courses of action we strive to put in place to mitigate harmful effects caused by such disruptions. However,

> "[w]hen these experiences become chronic it often results in *avoidance behavior* where the sufferer actively seeks to minimize contact with public situations or events that might be triggering. Such patterns can narrow and constrict existence by closing out a range of possible undertakings and projects." (Aho 2020: 264; emphasis added)

Anxiety of a more intense nature can lead to avoidance of, and withdrawal from, the social world. In fact, "chronic anxiety can erode away the temporal structure of existence itself, where the future is disclosed not as a horizon of accessible and worthwhile possibilities but as a region that is fundamentally hostile and threatening" (Aho 2020: 265). In the throes of anxiety, it can feel as though the world around you is collapsing, revealing that you are completely *insignificant*. With meaning and purpose having been stripped away, the world now appears unfamiliar, uncanny, and even threatening (Svenaeus 2011). Apprehension sets in with the evaporation of life purpose, stymieing efforts to avail oneself of future-directed possibilities for a self-fulfilling life where thriving is within reach.

Anxiety operates as a window into our selves, our lives, our connections with others, and our place in the social world. Therefore, "symptoms of anxiety are not merely expressions of underlying dysfunctions but also always products of interaction between factors within the patient and between the patient and her environment" (Glas 2020: 44). Furthermore, by investigating cases of unbelongingness that produce unnerving affectivity, "we see how a phenomenological analysis of anxiety can disclose the ways in which the experience accelerates our physiological and cognitive timing and distorts the embodied rhythms of everyday social life" (Aho 2020: 269). An agent's mood regulation is modulated in accordance with a socially scaffolded existence, revealing "the extent to which human existence itself is structured by time as 'thrown projection' and the ways in which anxiety can warp this structure by shortening or constricting our sense of the future" (ibid.). As a result of existential disruptions to one's sense-making, one experiences a constriction in

the "ability 'to be' by closing off a range of social meanings and possibilities that we would ordinarily draw on to narratively create or fashion our identities" (ibid.). A closed-off agent is socially disconnected and withdrawn, hence less likely to participate enthusiastically and meaningfully in her social environment henceforth encountered as a miasmic milieu of disorientating and disillusioning interactions unfit and unsolicitous for self-actualizational possibilities.

An anxious agent is one who feels shut-out on account of the social world encountered as being closed-off *to her*. Indeed, the social world is experienced as exclusionary and alienating through moods of fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety, while related emotions, and often cited interchangeably as synonyms to describe feeling worried/concerned or experiencing trepidation, nonetheless induce distinct stress responses. In folk psychology, two typical responses to fear-inducing scenarios are described as "fight or flight"; more recent commentary includes "freeze" and "fawn" as two additional reactions.[69] Fear is typically a response to a threat, real or perceived. Awareness of danger causes *panic* to set in. Anxiety, on the other hand, evokes *apprehension*: a sense of uneasiness causing doubt and unsurety about appropriate responses.

To illustrate the distinction between fear and anxiety, consider how the sense that someone is lurking in the shadows is more akin to fear-inducement, whereas the sense that a friend may be talking behind your back is more akin to anxiety-inducement. Herein lies the key distinguishing characteristic of fear vis-à-vis anxiety: whereas the former implicates one's *desire* to flee, the latter discloses little about one's *ability* to flee. Thus, while the impulse to flee is present in fear-inducing situations, the fact that fear often manifests as "an inhibited impulse to escape" (Micali 2022: 177) suggests that not all fear-inducement leads to flight-engagement. Nonetheless, the fear remains.

The fact that anxiety reveals little about desire for flight mode in worrying moments and experiences allows us to make an interesting inference: that the relationship between fear and anxiety is predominantly unidirectional rather than bidirectional. Specifically, while anxiety seldom gives rise to fear (consider, for instance, how feelings of unease and discomfort in being gossiped about have little to do with being afraid of your friends or feeling the urge to run away), is it

[69] URL = <https://www.simplypsychology.org/fight-flight-freeze-fawn.html>

rather more likely that fear in certain contexts and circumstances may give rise to anxiety. Consider how the inability to flee (from that which is causing one to be fearful) likely foments and exacerbates anxious feelings (about not being able to flee) – thus locking one in a vicious cycle of wanting to flee because one is fearful, yet often finding oneself being unable to successfully take flight, leading to anxiety about unattenuated fears and failed flights (again), with more intense unassuaged fears likely to goad you to try fleeing (yet again), leading to further aborted/failed attempts to flee, leaving one with unresolved desires to flee; and so on and so forth – round and round the loop of misery and despair.

Another distinguishing attribute of fear is how it is commonly used as a descriptive term in explicating the phenomenal qualities of atmospheres. Note, in particular, how we are far more likely to refer to an “atmosphere of fear” rather than an “atmosphere of anxiety” in describing an unsettling environment. Fear permeates an environment – unlike anxiety, which is an embodied phenomenon. To this end, “fear as an atmosphere shows itself as such only through anxiety, through our experience of the impossibility of fleeing” (Micali 2022: 177). As alluded to previously, in a state of anxiety, an agent exhibits disinclination to act or react – likely due to prior aborted and/or failed attempts to flee (due to fear). Only when anxiety gives rise to full-fledged fear (if/when it happens) does the impetus to flee kick in. Otherwise, in anxiety-inducing *but not* fear-inducing scenarios, one simply stays put in order to make sense of what is happening and what to do about it. For example, when you discover that a trusted so-and-so has been spreading nasty and disparaging rumors about you, you are likely to need space and time to process this devastating and disappointing news, then figure out appropriate courses of action (e.g., confrontation, ghosting, simply “not giving a fuck” and moving on, etc.).

In the throes of anxiety, an agent finds herself unable to respond with clarity and alacrity, in light of her ship of destiny being moored. The longer her ship of destiny remains stuck in the sands of time, the greater the likelihood her life becomes unstuck. Overcoming chronic anxiety—particularly in scenarios where an agent’s pillars of belongingness are rattled, shaking her out of her homelike existence—thus necessitates a more drawn-out process to work out appropriate anxiety responses to mitigate stresses/distresses and minimize

adverse effects, in view of unaddressed anxious feelings having the potential to incapacitate an affected agent, as she navigates her life journey into the future.

The salience of anxiety exposes the frailty of human connections and their susceptibility to social pressures and the general vicissitudes of life. However, the effects of unbelonging and unwelcoming environments do not always appear automatically, oftentimes evading observation at the outset. An example of an unwelcoming space falling along the more obvious end of the scale is, say, the presence of a counter-protestor at an opposing march (e.g., a pro-Israel protestor at a pro-Palestine march, and vice versa): the hostilities and anxieties implicated in this situation are likely palpable to any bystander. In other environments that do not exude hostility quite so obviously, we must rely on information provided through responses in bodily affects, to make sense of a space's atmosphere (Micali 2022: 177). Accordingly, it may be posited that a space in which anxiety permeates the atmosphere is thereby also (necessarily and inevitably) a space in which anxiety pervades those present.

Spaces that close us off interfere with our navigation of homelike environments. Closed-off spaces can make us feel like we are not supposed to be there. We are not meant for these spaces, and these spaces are not meant for us. When one experiences an environment as unwelcoming and inhospitable, feelings of worry are likely to creep in – rattling the pillar of safety, first and foremost, causing feelings of displacement to arise. An unsafe space is one that pushes you away, off your feet. In this manner, displacement anxiety may arise from wars, civil unrest, and armed conflict. With respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following events on 7 October 2023, tens of thousands of Palestinian residents found themselves homeless in their homeland. They were made refugees overnight. The glass walls of belongingness shattered, with rocks and missiles being thrown around. The Gazan conflict highlights a case not of "I do not belong", but rather "I *cannot* belong (any longer)", having lost one's home in a dual sense: one's home *as well as* one's homeland. In the lived experiences of a refugee—a homeless resident and citizen—one feels uprooted and superfluous (Enns 2022: 27) and therefore likely to be severely anxious about diminished future life prospects.

Displacement anxiety is also generated by natural disasters – a notable recent example being the volcanic eruptions in Iceland in late 2023,[70] forcing residents of affected areas to flee, rendering them homeless and their *oikos* unliveable. Being unwittingly and unwillingly thrust out from one's abode through natural disasters is no doubt a traumatic experience (not too dissimilar to losing one's home through warlike conditions), where all pillars of belongingness are destroyed beyond repair. Agents rendered homeless due to natural disasters, climate change, wars, and so forth most certainly experience heightened levels of anxiety – anxiety which can only be attenuated by rebuilding the pillars of belongingness elsewhere.

Yet another form of displacement anxiety can be found in nationalist sentiment (a theme alluded to in the previous chapter), an underlying cause of a specific kind of unbelongingness which generates a sense of displacement from one's native homeland: a distressing state of affairs where an agent no longer feels that her national stomping ground (country of birth/origin) is homelike, on account of seemingly rapid alternations to the sociocultural landscape (due to an influx of foreigners, for instance). This type of unease regarding the assimilation of new settlers is well explicated in the following passage:

> "A nativist reaction, among at least some of the longer-settled majority population and involving discourses about the impossibility of assimilation, is a phenomenon in most societies experiencing an inflow of massive numbers of immigrants whose ethnic and racial backgrounds, and cultural and religious allegiances, are perceived as unlike those of established residents. Views about "unmeltable" differences are fueled by the attachments of newcomers to traditions and identities often seen as at odds with national cohesion." (Foner & Simon 2015: 18)

The "nativist reaction" described above can be understood as a certain nationalist anxiety (a subset of displacement anxiety).[71] For certain citizens, "worries about the loss of cultural hegemony in the face of massive immigration, and the dangers that immigration and new diversity pose to core national cultural beliefs and practices, underpin concerns about those of immigrant

[70] URL = <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/11/europe/iceland-emergency-evacuates-threat-volcanic-eruption-intl-hnk/index.html - "Iceland declares state of emergency, evacuates residents over threat of volcanic eruption">

[71] Not all displacement-anxious agents exhibit nationalistic ideation. However, the nationalistically-anxious are necessarily also displacement-anxious, given their heightened concerns about loss of national identity and erosion of cultural homogeneity being implicated in excessive worry about *replacement* by unknown (and possibly hostile) others in one's homeland.

origin" (Foner & Simon 2015: 18) that may be particularly salient in their anxious feelings about a rapidly changing sociocultural environment increasingly less homelike. Demographic changes may induce feelings that one is less *safe* amongst increased numbers of *untrusted* strangers whose *acceptance* of local norms is unknown, to whom you are *unfamiliar* (and vice versa), and with whom you are unlikely to truly feel *free* and uninhibited to be your authentic self (for example, refraining from interacting with foreigners due to worry about causing offence with one's brand of humor). Anxious nationalists may therefore feel displaced, having to withdraw themselves from certain spaces and events where there is greater likelihood of interacting with unknown foreign entities.

Nationalistically-anxious agents are motivated by "taken-for-granted expectation … that newcomers will, and should, conform to and adopt mainstream norms and values" (Foner & Simon 2015: 18). When new migrants do not integrate well, and there is a huge influx of migrants, such that they change the sociocultural makeup of their new adoptive environment (be it a city, town, or rural setting), some local residents may develop a deep sense of unease at the rapidity and extent of said changes. The recent rise of so-called far-right populist leaders and parties has instigated debates on what place migrants have in European nations facing down—and becoming increasing wary of—uncontrolled tides of new migrants awash in their lands. The debate on migrants—whether their interests and needs can be properly balanced with those of local residents—in Europe contrasts markedly with that which occurs in North America, explicated in the following passage: "Canada and the United States are settler societies, founded, peopled, and built by continuous inflows of immigrants, unlike the countries of western Europe [in which] immigration, especially from other continents, has not been a core part of European identity the way it is in North American countries" (Foner & Simon 2015: 35). For these reasons, discourses about migration, integration, and belonging are characterized by different sets of ideals from one region to another. Thus, nationalist campaigns in parts of Europe tend to feature seemingly stronger populist and emotionally charged rhetoric. Nationalist anxiety is essentially *interpersonal anxiety writ large*, with each nation brewing its own supplies and brands of nationalist anxiety replete with varieties of flavors of unhomelikeness.

Nationalist anxiety does not receive nearly as much attention as integration anxiety, seeing as the latter concerns members of minority groups (more likely to be prone to existential vulnerabilities) rather than the dominant majority group (less likely to be prone to existential vulnerabilities), warranting further investigation of the former. After all, belongingness is an interpersonal and inter-relational act; and in analyzing homelikeness for natives versus migrants, the sociopolitical dynamics relating to population/demographic change, migration, integration, and the like must be addressed from both divergent perspectives. From the standpoint of a native, it is entirely conceivable that an environment that ceases to be recognizable as a homelike refuge can induce a kind of unbelongingness anxiety rooted in a sense that one has somehow been disowned – by community leaders, society at large, or one's own government. The feeling of being disowned is akin to feelings of abandonment and being left behind – in the case of nationalist anxiety, being abandoned or left behind by politicians and policymakers who seemingly prioritize different—unfamiliar and unrelatable—sets of goals and values (e.g., those promoting globalism and internationalism rather than patriotism and national pride). Nationalist anxiety has as its target concerns about loss of national identity, in a similar fashion to how eco-anxiety has as its target concerns about loss of environmental safeguards. Anxiety about loss of national identity implicates deep concern and troubled thoughts regarding the erosion of one's homelike scaffolding.

For example, consider how worry about multiculturalism and its implications for the preservation of the British way of life drives much of nationalist sentiment and discourse, a phenomenon evident in the divergent rhetoric employed by the Remain campaign in relation to the Leave campaign leading up to—and following—the Brexit vote in the UK in 2016.[72] This nationalist sentiment can be interpreted as a kind of hiraeth: a nostalgic and somewhat despair-laden longing for a state of affairs that is altogether absent and inaccessible. Anxiety of this nature—that things may never return to the way they were—is akin to diminished vitality likened to a "a bodily narrowing: the sense of impossibility shows itself primarily in the subject's inability to

[72] For an analysis of the Brexit versus Remain debate framed as a battle of norms and values between the "Somewheres" and "Anywheres" respectively, see Goodhart (2017); also see Chan & Kawalerowicz (2022) for commentary on Goodhart's thesis.

expand itself into the vastness” (Micali 2022: 179). Hiraeth-like anxiety shows up in the behavioral changes and mindset shifts of agents who feel their way of life is somehow constricted and impinged on by hostile and defamiliarizing sociocultural dynamics. This is a different kind of unbelongingness-anxiety to, say, saudade: a longing for a state of affairs that is out of reach, never was, and altogether unattainable. Saudade-like anxiety pertains to agents who yearn to belong anywhere else (other than their homeland, hence their status as migrants) but nevertheless resign to the fact that this may well be an onerous task – settling for settling where they are, as they go (i.e., on their journey to the next destination of belonging through new residency status). Thus, saudade-like symptoms are appropriately implicated in integration anxiety, in contrast to hiraeth-like symptoms more appropriately implicated in nationalist anxiety – the latter of which characterizes anxious feelings about one’s homeland seemingly slowly but surely slipping away from one’s grip amidst rising seas of migration.

Both nationalist anxiety and integration anxiety share in common an existential crisis of the kind that “disrupts the relation between life (fluidity) and form (continuity) by magnifying the present and its circumstances in a way that conceals its relation to fluidity and continuity” (Blum 1996: 683). The phenomenon of displacement is such that nobody is immune to this, whether you have lived someplace all your life or have recently moved there. Being thrown out from a homelike environment is cause for “self-reflection as a ‘return’ or recovery that comes toward oneself (what is, in a sense, already there) by virtue of what it expects (anticipates as lying ahead of itself, i.e., its unrealized possibility), making of the return a process of development, of moving forward and coming back” (Blum 1996: 684). Moreover, unhomelike anxiety—whether affecting the native or the migrant—is experienced as disempowering, as if something external imposes itself on you and gains dominion over you. To this end, Micali, referencing Kierkegaard, notes that “anxiety acquires a quasi-personal character and is treated as an alien power, with which—almost with whom—we interact”; in fact, “anxiety is an interlocutor as evasive as it is dominant”, appearing to us “as if it had its own particular agency” (Micali 2022: 184). The fact we interact with anxiety indicates that it is an entity unto itself. Anxiety may be, for instance, characterized as a demon that one battles with. Accordingly, anxiety can seem as though it has taken on a life of its own,

impinging on an agent's autonomy and interfering with her sense-making in the world, hence frustrating her efforts in enacting stable pillars of belongingness.

An agent's interactions with, and responses to, anxiety are often rooted in history (past experiences) and based on learned behaviors. Some of these behaviors may not be entirely productive, beneficial, or even rational for that matter, for "anxiety makes us see phantasms, it exaggerates dangers, it distorts perspectives in different ways according to different phenomena" (Micali 2022: 178). An anxiety-ridden agent may well be exaggerating the world being unfamiliar or unwelcome. In other words, her sense of unbelongingness could well be inaccurate or misconstrued. Thus, it is imperative she "gets it right" about what her anxious feelings mean and reveal to her, in view of anxiety's life-project-jeopardizing threats and negative mental health implications.

For example, anxiety, left unchecked, may lead to overwhelming feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Worse still, anxiety "urges us to convulsively perform actions that have an interesting specificity: they go in the diametrically opposite direction to our will, preparing our future paralysis" (Micali 2022: 185), thus rendering us incapacitated and ill-equipped to unmoor our respective ships of destiny and sail them into the future. Moreover, unattenuated anxiety may lead an agent to sabotage her own future:

> "Driven by the will to avoid the worst, we carry out actions that we believe are capable of safeguarding us from the future irruption of the negative, while they undermine our present defenses so much as to lay the foundations for our future helplessness. We take countermeasures which have a negative vocation: the counter-measures dictated by anxiety will prove to be counter-productive." (Micali 2022: 185)

By sabotaging her own future, an agent thereby diminishes her chances of re-enacting a sense of belonging. In performing actions with the expectation and hope that impending threats may be averted, an agent on occasion inadvertently sets in motion the conditions for helplessness (Micali 2022: 187). Through unmitigated anxiety, "a different relation to the world shows itself", one which appears "almost hypnotized by the imminence of future evil, seeing and looking for signs of its arrival everywhere" (ibid.). An anxious agent's behavioral responses are henceforth guided with the idea that the worst can and will happen at any given moment (ibid.). In the throes of anxiety, we sometimes shoot ourselves in the foot, in terms of being architects of our own misery and

suffering through our impaired decision-making. We tend to catastrophize, seeing the worst in people, things, and events. To this end, being anxious compounds one's reluctance to engage with the world. Therefore, while on one hand anxiety arises from unbelongingness, on the other hand anxiety exacerbates one's feelings of unbelonging – thus the vicious cycle continues. The anxiety agent, in effect, ushers forth—*enacts*—an undesirable outcome (unintendedly so), in the endeavor to re-establish the pillars of belongingness.

Ultimately, anxiety speaks to a lack of control in one's life. The pillars of your homelike existence fragment, rendering your life unrecognizable. The transformation may be so radical that you can no longer be yourself, with life's trajectory becoming fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity (Micali 2022: 188). With respect to unbelongingness-related anxiety, an agent finds herself in a situation that is best described as a form of *existential statis*: being stuck or anchored in a state of learned helplessness, convinced she is unable to change her situation and unable to control what happens next. Moreover, apprehension manifests as arrested action: she freezes up, unsure of how to proceed. This unsurety in indicative of her being out of touch with her environment (and perhaps out of touch with herself too). By thusly framing unbelongingness as an *illness of attunement*, we can interrogate not just anxiety but depression and other mental illnesses and psychological conditions arising from protracted, untreated, periods of chronically feeling out of place.

The notion of attunement utilized here borrows from the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa's (2019) resonance theory. Resonance, according to Rosa, is a way of encountering the world through affect and emotion: being touched by the world in such a way that one heeds its call for engagement by reaching out to it. In this sense, resonance has the opposite effect to alienation, which causes one to recoil and withdraw from the world. Resonance theory provides a useful framework in accounting for an agent's attunement to the world – a kind of relationship that simultaneously channels and transcends affectivity. Rosa outlines the concept of resonance as such:

> "Resonance … describes a relationship between two or more bodies or objects in keeping with the relational qualities obtained from physics. With respect to a theory of human relationships to the world, then, resonance describes a mode of *being-in-the-world*, i.e. a specific way in which subject and world come into relation with each other

> (through which relationship both first attain their form). … The core idea here is that the two entities in relation, in a vibratory medium (or resonant space), mutually affect each other in such a way that they can be understood as *responding to each other*, at the same time each *speaking with its own voice*." (Rosa 2019: 166-167)

Following from this definition, we can infer that resonances between "subject and world", "subject and object", and "subject and other (subject)" attest to various types of congruence implicated in relationality. Resonance is an apt concept for describing belongingness, in view of the two-way relationship it inheres. Resonance explains how intersubjectivity gains its salience and perseveres over time. Only when an agent is in tune with her environment does she feel a salient sense of belonging to it – that she has a stake in this relationship. Accordingly, failure to attune to her environment can therefore be inferred as a failure to assimilate and acclimate to her environment.

Prolonged failure to attune oneself to one's environment may induce an onset of symptoms foreshadowing the aetiology of mental illnesses such as anxiety that arise from feeling out of place. Lack of atmospheric resonance provides an agent with clues that she is truly in the grip of anxiety, in view of how, "when we are involved in an interactive context that is unfamiliar to us, in which it is not clear to us who or what we should expect, we all but automatically throttle our disposition toward resonance as a protective reaction and switch to a mute mode of relating to the world in order to guard against potential or likely injury" (Rosa 2019: 387). The body freezes and seizes up, telling us to venture no further into anxious spaces. In response, the anxious agent dons a suit of numbness as armor to continue navigating anxious spaces, where venturing as such is deemed necessary. In this manner, "[e]motions reveal our concerns … psychobiologically, by providing us tools to defend and position ourselves" (Glas 2020: 41) and thus how to act and react accordingly.

By now, it ought to be clear that agents experiencing anxiety on account of feeling out of place are less likely to participate in the social world, when compared to their counterparts who feel at home. These feelings are *scrutable*, given that "social conditions can be examined in terms of the extent to which they generate interactive contexts that encourage dispositional resonance or dispositional alienation" (Rosa 2019: 387). In the inter-relationality (or lack thereof) of anxious agents, their belongingness (or lack thereof) to the world

confronts them directly and unequivocally. Where unbelongingness exists on account of lack or loss of sociality, an agent's attention is likely focused on enacting a future in which opportunities arise for reintegration into the social world, with a fair degree of urgency. After all, the endeavor to find and secure your place in the world can be especially intimidating when you are saddled with anxiety. Then again, there is no way of knowing for sure if you belong *unless you try*. The very attempt elicits feedback from the world. Lived experiences—positive, negative, or neutral—provide indispensable clues on how to proceed each step of the way. Along the path toward belongingness, uncertainty always seems to follow and linger like a shadow of doubt. And deeper in the depths of the darkness of one's mind, lurks the fear of failure:

> "The terror of failure allows us to preserve the primary narcissism at first, postponing the encounter with reality. A confused combination of inhibition and disproportionate ambitions occurs here. The involuted condition oscillates between the secret terror of failure and the corresponding desire to prove one's own value in an incontestable way. It is precisely the terror of failure that pushes the self to lose itself in phantasies, in exalted projections of one's own imagination. … In escaping towards the phantasmatic, one avoids the responsibility of the decision. But that very escape will in the future turn into an accusation to which the self must but will not be able to answer." (Micali 2022: 198)

The fear of failure is a major roadblock in the treacherous journey to belong. But one must always remember that safe passage is never guaranteed.

Indeed, the path to belongingness is paved with disappointment. Each letdown constitutes a "disappearance of that virtuality on which I relied", resulting in "a small earthquake in time-consciousness: I am now in uncharted waters" (Micali 2022: 200). In Husserlian terms, this means that with each experience of disappointment, "the protentional continuum can no longer rely on that anticipated possibility—it can no longer "lean" on that eventuality that already guaranteed me stability through its intertwining with the retentional continuum" (ibid.). Hence the compounding anxiety following each setback. Less resilient agents may find that failure makes all effort expended seem like a chore and an absolute waste, and thus "may be seen as a small death because it *annihilates* one's own singular future *Dasein* on which one had already counted" (Micali 2022: 200; emphasis added). Avoidant behaviors—reflecting the desire to escape from the present and be someplace else, emotionally,

mentally, and physically—can become a trap, a spell from which we need to disenchant ourselves (Micali 2022: 201-202). Avoidant behaviors only serve to increase anxiety in the long-run; in essence, a delaying of the inevitable. Anxiety, to be overcome, must be tackled head-on. To this end, novel therapeutic interventions offer promising possibilities for addressing anxiety (see section 5.4). But before we delve into this discussion, we must address anxiety's accomplice in violating homelike spaces: depression, an adverse mental health condition pertaining to past time orientation and ill feelings thereof – manifesting as existential hazards on our respective paths to belongingness.

5.2: Unbelongingness and Depression

Unbelongingness, as we have established, is characterized by temporal dimensions in the experience of adverse mental health, most prominently in the form of anxiety and depression – the latter of which is the focus of this section. Depression is associated with experiences of low mood and feelings of sadness, emptiness, and hopelessness (Wilkinson 2023), manifesting as disruption of one's taken-for-granted immersion in the social world (Ratcliffe 2014) and disturbance of one's existential feelings (Ratcliffe 2008). Depression captures moods and emotions characterized by gloominess and melancholy, often further accompanied by unease and malaise.

Having depression impacts negatively on one's assessment of the social world; one tends to be more guarded and apprehensive in one's social interactions. For example, "people with mild-to-moderate levels of depression may be particularly sensitive to social information because that information is relevant to their need to belong" (Steger & Kashdan 2009: 294). Due to a paucity of uplifting and memorable social interactions in their past, depressed agents tend to ruminate to a greater extent over the quality of future social interactions. Upsetting social interactions disrupt the "pre-reflective, dynamic patterns of habitual anticipation [that] shape all of our experiences, thoughts, and activities" (Ratcliffe 2023a: 4). When recalling past unpleasant encounters

in the social world, we are reminded of the disappointment associated with feeling let down. Thus, “[w]hen anticipated events fail to arise, there is often an immediate awareness of unfulfilled expectation” (ibid.). Regular experiences of unfulfilled expectations coupled with prolonged feelings of unworthiness can cause a depressed agent’s mental health to spiral downwards.

Depression (like anxiety) is a sliding scale; with increased severity, unbelongingness is magnified. Thus, “people with higher levels of depressive symptoms reported a higher number of negative social interactions and a lower sense of belonging in social interactions” (Steger & Kashdan 2009: 296). In a heightened state of depression, one might experience impoverished vitality. Estrangement or exclusion from social participation and shared possibilities (Ratcliffe 2023b) can leave you with a gaping void or deep emptiness inside. Moreover, you become acutely aware of your predicament and how out of synch you are with the social world, *compared to* others:

> “Where a gulf between one’s own possibilities and those of others remains salient, there can also be a heightened sense of one’s own conspicuousness. One feels different in a way that is inseparable from an experience of *standing out*, and so loneliness is often associated with feelings of shame, awkwardness, and vulnerability.” (Ratcliffe 2023a: 9; original emphasis)

As a result, a depressed agent feels trapped, with “experience of time slowing down, where moments stretch out and minutes feel like hours, intensifying the sense of heaviness and stagnation that characterizes depression” (Sofocleous 2023: 9). In a depressed state, it can feel like your situation is inescapable – rendering you seemingly trapped in what feels like “an eternalized state” where you are “unable to escape what is coming” and “consumed by the anticipation of future suffering and the weight of past experiences” (Sofocleous 2023: 14-15). Constant rumination about past failures (confirmed) and future failures (assumed/imagined) compounds one’s misery and diminished self-worth, rendering you further estranged from the present moment. Experiences of “temporal disturbances in depression contribute to a pervasive sense of timelessness or time distortion” (Sofocleous 2023: 9), leading to further desynchronization and detachment (from oneself, others, and the world at large); and in more severe cases, an increasingly tenuous grip on reality.

Unbelongingness pertaining to depression implicates an agent's relationship with respect to the past: past events/experiences and memories that lead her to conclude that she does not belong. In the case of an agent who is unable to reconcile herself with aspects of her past, *alienation* becomes a prominent feature of her lived experience. This takes the form of distancing: distancing herself from her *former self*, distancing herself from others, and distancing herself from the world. Such "experiences of alienation are rooted in a *lack of belief in one's own efficacy*" (Rosa 2019: 176; original emphasis), where the unbelonging agent feels disempowered, incapable of altering her existential disposition: "the inhibition of inner time, experienced as a slowing down of lived time or even a detachment from the concept of time as a whole, hinders their ability to move beyond their past experiences" (Sofocleous 2023: 11). Thus, depression impinges on an agent's future-orientation: "as the experience of lived time is disrupted in its entirety, the future is experienced as blocked, with the individual feeling that they cannot progress toward the future" (ibid.) The future begins to look increasingly bleak, uncertain, and uninviting – devoid of possibilities for change and improvement in one's existential predicament: that the pillars of belongingness seem increasingly out of reach.

Further analysis of depression and its symptoms reveals several similarities with anxiety and its symptoms. It is no wonder then that agents afflicted with one also tend to be afflicted with the other. As noted by Aho:

> "Anxiety and depression not only share common physiological characteristics, hereditary factors, and genetic etiologies (e.g. the production of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine); they generally respond to comparable pharmacological and psychotherapeutic treatments and have symptomatic similarities, especially in regards to feelings of guilt, shame, and loss of self-control." (Aho 2020: 262, footnote 1)

Both anxiety and depression are temporal illnesses: anxiety, of the future; and depression, of the past (Eysenck et al 2006). Patients with symptoms of one of these often exhibit symptoms of the other too. The past and the future exist along the same temporal continuum after all. Given that "depression is experienced as prolonged and eternalized with no anticipation for future recovery" (Sofocleous 2023: 13), disappointment may lead to demoralization and a disinclination to reach out to the social world. Unresolved problems of the past continue to impact an agent's present and future; for example, the quality

of social interactions she encounters. An agent's ability to live authentically and to meaningfully participate in the social world is at stake. Unable to reconcile living an inauthentic life, an alienated agent's existence crumbles. Along with loss of authenticity, the agent also experiences loss of autonomy and agency. As a result, it can feel as though the world or a certain context within it no longer speaks to us (Rosa 2019: 178). In a world which no longer recognizes and accommodates my existence, I cannot truly and fully be myself. In this world, I have *lost a sense of who I am*, relinquishing the prospect of who *I can become*.

Depression induced by unbelongingness erodes one's standing in the world. She is hampered in her attempts to live a life in full bloom. Being thwarted in acting in a certain way is an infringement on one's agency and an impingement on one's individuality. Moreover, a life devoid of meaning (and meaningfulness) confronts us as depersonalizing. Individuality is essential for being a fully-fledged human being capable of realizing her full potential, as noted by phenomenologists like Scheler (1973; see also Altamirano 2021: 12). A depressed agent's individuality is fragile, being vulnerable to disruption from external forces (Altamirano 2021: 13). A breakdown in self-esteem may ensue in certain instances. This outcome is psychopathologically relevant, seeing as self-esteem is one of the main psychological needs of an agent (Maslow 1963). An agent with low self-esteem navigates the world in a disorientated fashion. As a result, she may find herself grappling with a whole host of negative emotions and moods such as shame, embarrassment, shyness, guilt, regret, and so forth, resulting in varying degrees of aversion to prosocial environments.

In the throes of depression, an agent's body no longer extends out into the world. She becomes withdrawn – from the world, from others, and even herself. Accordingly, depersonalization is a constitutive component of depressed lived experiences. An agent's "depression can lead to varying degrees of derealization, whereby the world appears removed and at a distance, unreachable, totally abstract and foreign to one's self–cold, unaccommodating, uninviting or even hostile" (Petrement 2023: 38). To live with depression means "to live in a world bereft of possibilities for transformation" (Petrement 2023: 39), trapped in a mode of existence where meaning-making is greatly diminished. The afflicted agent thereby struggles to find—and secure—a place in a world experienced as fragile and indeterminate.

It should come as no surprise then that "deficits in perceived sense of belonging [are] significantly related to greater severity of depression, hopelessness, current suicidal thoughts, and prior suicide attempts" (Fisher et al 2015: 36). After all, a great deal of how an agent feels about herself (her self-worth) and her situation (existential state of affairs) will depend on how she manages her rational and irrational fears and hopes. Depression is often accompanied by apprehension, manifesting as withdrawal from social life. Those who suffer from depression often suffer from social anxiety too – feeling disengaged, disintegrated, and disenfranchised constituting common features of depressed lived experiences. For a depressed agent lacking a sense of belonging, she likely struggles with feelings of inadequacy on account of being denied access to life-affirming affordances. As such, loss of self-esteem and discouraging thoughts about future life prospects often permeate lived experiences of an unbelonging agent – an "overwhelming sense of emptiness and despair that accompanies depression experiences leads to a profound loss of anticipation and hope for the future" (Sofocleous 2023: 14), followed by "the experienced impossibility of regaining positive emotions or escaping the grip of one's depressive state" (Sofocleous 2023: 15). For a depressed agent, there is a pervasive sense that she in unlikely to succeed in her attempts to reconnect with the social world in a meaningful way.

For a depressed agent, the social world no longer resonates with her in a salient way: "[t]he past, instead of being a coherent and retrievable collection of memories, becomes clouded with a sense of emptiness, where recollections lose their vibrancy and emotional resonance" (Sofocleous 2023: 9). Resonance, as I have posited previously, presents a possible explanandum for both world-attunement and self-attunement in describing the dynamic relations underpinning the phenomenology of belongingness. Rosa (2019) suggests that through bodily resonance—awareness of and responses to subtle bodily cues—a process of mutual incorporation takes place whereby persons/objects are interlocked into shared "vibes" or "wavelengths" through which the coupled persons/objects *flow into one another*. In depressed states, flow is interrupted; the pregiven world unravels as an agent unplugs and detaches from what she encounters as increasingly unhomelike surroundings:

> "Insofar as one's resonant wire thereby becomes rigid and inflexible at both ends, subject and world lose their color and sound in equal measure. This, metaphorically speaking, is the core of a relationless relation, which can be observed in and measured by, among other things, the extent to which individuals suffering from sever depression lose their capacity for bodily resonance. They no longer react or psychophysically respond to the physical signals of others, who then frequently come to view them as *no longer reachable*." (Rosa 2019: 180; emphasis added)

This unreachability colors and stains a dissonant, depressed agent's orientation to the world. Melancholia and malaise thus feature prominently in the everyday life of an agent beset with low sociability drive.

In the throes of existential uncertainty—where an agent is no longer sure (and *assured*) of who she is—she finds herself no longer being grounded in, or anchored to, a meaningful existence. Her being-in-the-world has become precarious and hazardous. To feel out-of-touch with oneself and to feel out-of-place in one's environment has a looping cause-and-effect dynamic. As a consequence of prolonged bouts of depression, the afflicted agent henceforth loses touch with her environment as well. The world pushes back – and when the world pushes back hard enough, she may be thrust into freefall. Nonetheless, there is an upside – for "depression reveals that we do not usually confront the world as fixed and static, but in fact experience *reality as a dynamic possibility space*" (Petrement 2023: 40; emphasis added). New possibilities take time to emerge. An agent in the throes of depression may find herself in a state of emotional limbo, disconnected from the world, the other, and the self (Alberti 2019: 215), hence unable to access new possibilities – let alone make sense of their revelatory potential. A depressed agent on the path to recovery, however, may discover the ameliorative effects of re-negotiating her relationship with her past. This could take the form of forgiving her past selves, being kinder to one's present self, letting go of negative self-talk, and so forth. Healing from the wounds of unhomelikeness is often a long, arduous, and disorientating process. Then again, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.[73]

In a state of depression, one's relationship with the world alters in demoralizing ways – leading to strong inclinations to withdraw from the world and from others: "[s]uch is the case in depression, in which a numbed capacity

[73] An ancient Chinese proverb derived from the teachings of Laozi (aka "Lao Tzu").

for expressiveness shuts down intercorporeal dialogue – and thus, in more generally, our ability to participate in a shared world" (Petrement 2023: 39). Transformations are not only intersubjective but also *intra*subjective. In a state of depression, one's self-talk changes – often for the worse. Accordingly, the depressed agent experiences her self differently (distortedly so): it "feels qualitatively different" in the sense that it "lacks volition" and is "infused with a sense of fatigue and aimlessness", being "infused with pervasive low mood, and structured by negative self-related thoughts" (Davey & Harrison 2022). In turn, "low mood observed in depression may contribute to attentional impairments and attentional impairments may in turn perpetuate low mood" (Keller et al 2019). As a result, an agent who lacks volition experiences impairment with respect to the allocation of attention to a variety of cognitive tasks such as perception, goal-directedness, and decision-making (ibid.). Cognitive impairment has serious repercussions for an agent's autonomy and agency. She is likely to face challenges previously non-existent, such as disruption to the usual taken-for-granted navigating of spaces and interactions.

Incapacitated with depression, "a subject *experiences* a felt sense of not being 'part of' that society – alienation or marginalisation in one taxonomy of non-belonging – not being non-integrated, but not being *integral*" (Cover 2020: 571; original emphasis). To be integrated yet non-integral can produce unsettling thoughts and feelings; namely, that you are insignificant and do not matter. For the most part, one becomes demoralized. One's spirit is, to an extent, crushed and broken. For all intents and purposes, therefore, a depressed and unbelonging agent devoid of resonance with her social environment may invariably be described as "spiritually impoverished" (my terminology) in a Schelerian sense – where bliss is non-existent, and despair is all too apparent. A diminished existence defined by low mood, despairing thoughts, unsatisfied needs/desires, and unattained life goals can feel like a devalued life characterized by *poor-spiritedness*. Devaluation, according to Scheler, "distorts our notion of individuality and, as a consequence, of community" (Altamirano 2021: 26). This distortion is a stark and painful reminder that the world has seemingly rejected and cast you out.

Social spaces that push you away, rather than pull you in, may be described as lonely places. Ratcliffe (2023a) outlines a lonely place as such:

> "A lonely place renders certain possibilities inaccessible and, in feeling lonely, they appear "inaccessible to me". The salience of their inaccessibility is constituted by their remaining available to actual or hypothetical others, who reside in that place or elsewhere. The experience is a contrastive one, thus accounting for why loneliness is so closely associated with experiences of separation, alienation, and difference from others." (Ratcliffe 2023a: 5)

According to this definition, then, a lonely place is thereby an unbelonging space: one which elicits participation from others *but not from me*. The feeling of alienation diffuses through the air like a numbing miasma, choking you and stripping you of vitality, remonstrating with you that you do not belong. Hence, a lonely place may also be characterized by what Krueger (2021) calls an "atmosphere of exclusion". Atmospheres are built-in features of the natural environment – mediums through which we relate to the world. They regulate our affective experiences, emotional responses, and behavioral outputs. Atmospheres "furnish *possibilities*—possibilities that help or hinder us as we find our way in the world" (Krueger 2021: 111; original emphasis). To this end, atmospheres constitute "affective arrangements" which "modulate our agency" in the sense that "they shape how we feel and find our way, including how we find our way alongside others" (Krueger 2021: 114-115). In this manner, atmospheres act as navigational tools guiding lonely and/or depressed agents toward belonging spaces (and away from exclusionary ones) – spaces hopefully more conducive for one's recuperation, amelioration, and convalescence.

The Ratcliffian concept of lonely places alongside the Kruegerian concept of atmospheres of exclusion aptly describe the alienating, disconcerting, and repellent nature of social spaces experienced as belonging to others *but not to me*. Ejection thus feels like rejection, giving rise to dejection. In being excluded from shared spaces, it would be difficult not to feel that *something is wrong with me*: "a lack of access to social and relational possibilities [is] experienced as a deficit originating in *oneself*, experiences of which "lend themselves to talk of feeling or being *empty* inside" (Ratcliffe 2023a: 9; original emphasis). Despite the salience of this emptiness, the experience is often altogether abstruse and inscrutable. As a core feature of depression, emptiness can have a debilitating effect, resulting in diminished capacity to make sense of a given situation, seeing as "depressed people's social information-processing biases appear to make it less likely that they will

perceive cues of acceptance and belonging in social interactions" (Steger & Kashdan 2009: 289). In view of this, depressed agents are particularly vulnerable in the quest to belong. Severe depression is associated with—can lead to—more worrying developments, as the analysis of suicidal ideation in the following section seeks to illuminate.

5.3 Unbelongingness and Suicidality

This section explores how severe mental illness in the form of suicidality is psychopathologically significant in any investigation into more extreme cases of unbelongingness. Despite the preponderance of suicidality throughout society, suicide remains a difficult subject to broach, given the associated social taboos and stigmas (van der Burgt et al 2021). In view of findings that "people who have a low sense of belonging have a higher risk of having suicidal thoughts or a history of suicide attempts" (Hatcher 2013: 434), the task at hand is to elucidate, through a phenomenological lens, how features of unbelongingness intersect with suicidality. Indeed, many of the contributing factors to suicide correlate to—and corroborate—the kinds of lived experiences described by subjects lacking a sense of belonging.

Lacking a sense of belonging may be experienced in a variety of different ways, mediated by the depth of absence generated by the missing pillars of belongingness. Indeed, unbelongingness is describable – hence *scrutable*—in "experienced *in*" terms. Digging deeper, unbelongingness may also be explicated in "experienced *as*" terms. Research yields reports of failing to belong being experienced as a personal or moral failure, one that constitutes an unliveable pain (Cover 2020: 571). Failed interpersonal constructs may give rise to feelings of uselessness, where an individual feels alienated from other people and experiences oneself as failing to be "an integral member of family, friends, or valuable social group" (Heilbron et al 2014: 207), accompanied by an inability to forgive oneself for one's failures (Horowski 2022). Moreover, agents on the further end of the unbelongingness scale "engage in the process of

social comparison to evaluate themselves in reference to their perceptions of others' attitudes/behavior (i.e., social norms)" in order to "adapt their behavior in such a way that will confirm a favorable sense of self" (Heilbron et al 2014: 213). Unfavorable evaluations of oneself may lead to feelings of shame and guilt. Embarrassment shuts down one's willingness to openly discuss one's inner struggles (Jobes 2018: 198). Lacking control over one's life is psychologically and emotionally painful, with suicide often seen as the only viable option to regain a sense of control (ibid.), as well as to ease the burden on others (Heilbron et al 2014: 208). The unliveability of pain can be overcome through "a deep feeling of recognition that may be characterized by the kind of ontological weight that connects us to the place where we feel both deeply ourselves and deeply connected to our common humanity" (Boden 2018: 56) – the kind of recognition (being noticed) that a sense of belonging confers. The implication here is that belongingness (of the right kind) may act as a buffer against suicide risk, helping an unbelonging agent overcome the unbuttressed unhomelike pillarless conditions in her umwelt leaving her exposed to the vicissitudes of life – precluding any potential slides into abysses of despair by nipping in the bud any germinating seeds of doom and gloom. The sooner and earlier the intervention(s), the better her chances of staving off suicidal ideation.

In the endeavor to scrutinize the phenomenon of suicidality and its association with unbelongingness, let us begin our inquiry at the inception point, if you will, catalyzing an agent's descent into a suicidal mindset and gradual dissociation from her lifeworld. Symptoms of dissociation are typically found in "changes in perception of oneself, and one's sense of environment and time" (Firestone 2018: 170). These symptoms are transient, and often vary in severity and intensity. In a crisis state of suicidality, afflicted agents report acting like automatons: they have poor emotional regulation, become unattuned to the consequences of their actions, are unable to assuage their fears, lose empathy for themselves, and gradually detach from their sense of self (ibid.). Severity of symptoms may be affected by compounding factors such as flashbacks, where the re-experiencing of past trauma may cause the afflicted agent to lose awareness of her surroundings and thereby act impulsively, aggressively, and in self-destructive ways (Pompili 2012b: 173). On the severe

end of the scale, an unbelonging agent may be particularly vulnerable to indulge in self-harm and other behaviors symptomatic of suicidal ideation.

The causality of suicidal ideation is multifaceted, with "thwarted belonging" (Joiner 2005) being a notable cause. According to this interpersonal theory of suicide, one must possess the desire, belief, and ability in order to attempt suicide. The desire (to die) stems from profound social disconnection and a failure to belong, accompanied by the belief that one is a burden to others. One study into the psychological dimension of suicide found that "perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness synergistically predict suicidal ideation" (Kleiman et al 2014: 213), taking into account a combination of cognitive and interpersonal factors. Perceiving oneself as a burden precipitates social withdrawal, hence an untethering from integrated sociality. Lacking social integration, in Durkheimian terms, means lacking a prophylactic against suicidality (Durkheim 1952: 124-125). For Durkheim, suicide results from a tussle between individuality and sociality, the result of which is a detachment from a felt sense of cohesion and togetherness (Durkheim 1952: 167-169). This detachment takes the form of severe affective loneliness, leading to the relegation or marginalization of the self to the fringes of society – to a point of unliveability (Durkheim 1952: 170). Without a tangible community or support network to belong to, deprived of vital existential needs, conditions become ripe for suicidal ideation to take root.

The ability to carry out the act (of suicide) can be acquired through a combination of factors that include desensitization to violence, decreased fear of pain and death, and the necessary knowhow of method and technique to actualize the process (of ending one's life). With desire, belief, and ability combinatorially present, the eventuality of suicidality as reprieve from unbearable pain becomes ever more real (Kleiman et al 2014; Boden 2018). Joiner's "framing of suicide in the context of certain kinds of belonging" is useful "even if in ways which tend to pathologize those who are isolated by failures to belong" (Cover 2020: 572). In placing failure to belong under a psychopathological lens, we gain deeper insights into the experience of despair at being non-existent in the presence of others and the impact this *unpersoning* has on mental health deterioration. From this analysis comes awareness of how the basic human need to belong is rooted in an instinctual desire for

communicative attention; in other words, *to be noticed*. Being unnoticed can be interpreted as one being dispensable and inconsequential. Repeated thwarted attempts to belong can make one feel like a failure.

Indeed, loneliness—stemming from perpetual thwarted attempts to belong—is a prime condition that generates deeply negative affectivity and has a lasting diminishing effect on a person's mood. A chronically lonely person may experience long periods of disconnection from the social world in ways that are depressing, despairing, and debilitating. Left unchecked, the festering disillusionment may escalate into desperation, leading to increasingly worrisome developments, such as various forms of psychological disorder – potentially even suicidal ideation. An individual who reaches the stage of suicidal ideation tends to be overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness (Schlimme 2018: 31), accompanied with a perceived lack of life opportunities afforded to her. In this manner, we can consider chronic loneliness to be a form of grief, where the affected individual mourns the life she once had and/or the life she wished she had had. For a suicidal individual, she experiences "unbearable psychological pain" (aka "psychache") from which she aims to escape (Pompili 2012a: 19). "Psychache" is a term coined by Shneidman (1999), referring to intensely felt psychological pain. When an agent's loneliness becomes intolerable beyond the point of assuagement or amelioration, resulting developments of psychache may become psychopathologically concerning.

Suicidally inclined agents finding themselves in perpetual states of anomie—lacking meaningful connections and a sense of life purpose—are especially susceptible to grim moods, unhealthy thoughts, and emotional volatility. These unbelonging individuals are likely plagued with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, compounded by the lack of an identifiable support network. Thus, "it seems possible that an individual's perceived lack of belonging can exacerbate a depressive episode and/or degree of hopeless thoughts, which often develop prior to the onset of suicidal ideation" (Fisher et al 2015: 37). Lacking a sense of belonging, in its most egregious incarnations, potentiates emotional downward spirals from which psychache-burdened agents may never return. Having reached rock bottom, a suicidal agent may find herself "compelled to escape" – a process of "cognitive deconstruction"

resulting in poorer impulse control and higher propensity for engagement in risk-taking behaviors (Rudd & Perez-Munoz 2021: 160). Deep in an abyss of despair and psychache, lost and afraid, a suicidally oriented agent may find herself abandoning all prospects of finding tunnels of hope leading her out – let alone reaching any light at the ends of the tunnels.

Contributing factors to suicide risk such as a profound sense of alienation, depressive thought patterns, low self-esteem, prolonged periods of social isolation, regular bouts of chronic loneliness, and a sense that one's pain and suffering will never end lay the psychopathological groundwork for suicidal ideation to emerge. As with cases of depression, suicidal ideation is implicated in loneliness (albeit more severe forms, with respect to the latter). Reports of loneliness correlate with suicidal thoughts and behaviors across the age spectrum (Kleiman et al 2018: 140). Furthermore, "loneliness was a significant predictor of later SIB [suicidal ideation and/or behavior]", along with "evidence that depression mediated the loneliness of later SIB relationship" (McClelland et al 2020: 891). Given the overlap between loneliness and suicide risk, any robust analysis of unbelongingness would do well to interrogate the motivations for suicidality and implications for mental health outcomes and interventions.

The exigency of attenuating suicidal thoughts and behaviors through appropriate interventions is laid bare in what is *missing* in a lonely agent's life: absences (of the lack and loss kinds) "related to social factors of cohesion and integration" attributable to such social factors as lack of social connection and lack of social support services (Shamsaei et al 2020: 4), indicating that loneliness is indeed a probable contributing factor in suicidal ideation. Shamsaei et al further add that lack of belongingness—the inability to have one's emotional needs (through acceptance, attention, support, understanding, and empathy) taken care of through affiliation to a social group—features prominently in suicidal ideation (Shamsaei et al 2020: 5). The authors found that those "with a lower sense of belonging are more likely to report current or past suicidal thoughts or attempts than individuals with greater sense of belonging" (Shamsaei et al 2020: 6), summing up their findings as follows:

> "The experience of the participants showed sense of belonging has demonstrated significant relationships with suicidal thoughts, highlighting its potential utility in refining assessment of suicide risk. Sense of belonging is conceptualized as an individual's

> experience of feeling valued, needed, and accepted by people in his or her social environment. Need for love and belonging provides an important target for assessment and intervention in the treatment and prevention of suicide. Cognitive, behavioural, and interpersonal interventions may help to improve an individual's sense of belonging and decrease symptoms of depression and hopelessness." (Shamsaei et al 2020: 7)

Lonely individuals lacking belonging are most susceptible to developing psychopathological symptoms that put them at risk of suicidal behaviors, and therefore require the appropriate care, attention, and intervention. In modern society, and in public spheres, there is a tendency to measure someone's likeability in terms of her place in the world of sociality. Social pressures to have an active social life compound the misery of those who find it a struggle to make friends. Thus, chronic loneliness could in certain contexts pave the way for suicidal ideation and/or related adverse mental conditions to emerge.

Several studies have established clear links between suicidality and occurrence of mental illness. A staggering 90% of agents who attempt suicide meet the criteria for (definitions of) mental disorder (Gvion & Apter 2011). In fact, most mental disorders were found to be associated with increased suicide risk – with mood disorders, borderline personality disorder (BPD), schizophrenia, and substance use disorders associated with higher levels of suicide risk (Chesney et al 2014). One study showed that BPD in particular is most strongly associated with both suicide attempts and completions (Gvion & Apter 2012). However, in the same study, the authors emphasized that having a mental disorder does not automatically denote suicidal ideation or behavior. There are several contributing factors to suicidality, including why suicide is contemplated (and executed, pardon the pun).

For example, chronic feelings of loneliness and alienation may lead to viewing suicide as one way (perhaps the *only* option left) to end one's pain, misery, and suffering (Gvion & Apter 2012), with agents lacking requisite and adequate communication skills, social networks, and support structures being most vulnerable (ibid.). Furthermore, psychache resulting from traumatic experiences denying agents access to basic existential needs is another predictor for suicidal ideation (ibid.). Trauma has been further identified as a leading risk factor for suicidal ideation and behavior (Krysinska et al 2009). Research on military personnel and war veterans, long known to suffer from

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), found strong association between cases of PTSD and suicidality (Sareen et al 2007). Higher levels of subjective stress, along with other related factors such as depression and hopelessness, were found to correspond with greater likelihood and prevalence of suicide attempts (Shelef et al 2017). In light of a combination of stress, depression, trauma, hopelessness, psychache, and other factors featuring prominently in phenomenological descriptions of suicidal subjects, it is evident that suicidality is a complex composite existential phenomenon meriting ongoing scholarship.

Now for an important caveat, before proceeding further along our investigation of suicidality: contrary to population opinion, suicidality implicates lack of optimism first and foremost: "those who are suicidal are less able to generate positive thoughts about the future, relative to individuals who are not suicidal" (Kirtley et al 2018: 17). In other words, rather than suicidality implicating greater preponderance of negative and pessimistic thoughts, suicidality is rather more accurately characterized by "a *dearth of positive thoughts* about the future" (Kirtley et al 2018: 20; emphasis added); and where suicidal agents *do* engage in positive future thinking, they are incapable of envisaging possibilities for enacting positive future outcomes *for themselves* (Kirtley et al 2018: 21). In other words, a world of positive future possibilities is indeed conceivable and accessible for others – *but not for me*. A world where there is no place for me, is a world not worth living in anymore. Perhaps nobody will miss me when I am gone, one might be so inclined to think/feel.

To make sense of why suicides happen, it is imperative to shed light on the kinds of suffering experienced by the suicidally inclined. After all, "suicide is *not* a disease of the brain like senility but rather has a very different formula, specifically that suicide *is* rather extreme (unbearable) psychological pain coupled with the idea that death (cessation) can provide a solution to the problem of seemingly unacceptable mental distress" (Shneidman 2018: 210; original emphasis). To this end, the term "psychache" is perhaps the most appropriate term for describing the general mood of one's inner world experienced from the point of view of a suicidally oriented agent. When psychache occurs unabatingly, thereby becoming unbearable, end-of-one's-life may be sought as a remedy or escape from anguish beyond that which one can accept or bear (Pompili 2012a: 19). In this frame of mind, suicide is deemed a

way out—perhaps the *only* one at that—to stem the incessant flow of intolerable pain and negative thoughts. There is a sense that something is "profoundly wrong"; an awareness of stress, malaise, and "general agitated ennui" as contributing factors to suicidal ideation (Maris 2019: 15-16, 21). Persistent psychache disrupts the flow of time and one's sense of place in the world. Accordingly, "the most direct way to reduce the heightened psychache (pain) which drives the suicide is first to reduce the heightened perturbation which drives the pain—and oftentimes this can be done by addressing the heightened external press (of strained interpersonal relationships, unemployment, school problems, etc.)" (Shneidman 2018: 214). To successfully manage suicide risk—for a suicidal subject to overcome the urge for self-destruction (Shneidman 2018: 215)—environmental (and not just psychological/internal) factors must be addressed. In other words, to enact better mental health outcomes, a suicidally oriented agent's umwelt needs to be re-scaffolded in such a way that new possibilities for pulling herself out of the abyss are within her reach and grasp.

To enhance scrutability of suicidally significant lived experiences, it is imperative we grasp "the sheer existence of actual cases of suicide in the immediate human environment of the subject makes suicide a deeply internalized option in the mind (that is to say, in the [hi]story, and in its co-entanglement with other [hi]stories) of the subject" (Macdonald & Naudin 2014: 40) In a suicidal headspace, one's narrativized character (i.e., oneself, as the protagonist) in one's life story is recast as someone who is stuck in a rut with no reprieve in sight. At some point, a suicidal agent may begin disengaging from herself as a social being, perhaps even from her own self as an experiencer of life – a life worth living *and* continuing to live (for). Thoughts of *ending it all* to unplug from unbearable pain the suffering (i.e., psychache) may float to the surface, permeating the horizon of one's awareness.

Unbelonging agents in the throes of psychache most vulnerable to suicide risk exhibit a range of characteristics "includ[ing] having a mental disorder, psychological traits such as impulsivity and aggression, feelings of loneliness and alienation, and belonging to particular cultural groups" (Salman et al 2017: 122), revealing that certain kinds of group-belongingness—namely cultural minority communities—are associated with increased suicidal risk, a finding corroborated into another study (Chu et al 2013). These results are

interesting and perhaps somewhat counter-intuitive: they suggest that, in certain cases, group-belongingness is an insufficient buffer against suicidal ideation. One conclusion to draw is that belongingness (or lack thereof) is only one factor in assessing suicidality (and risk thereof) – and relatedly, determining suicidal outcome. Another conclusion to draw from the link between suicidality and cultural-bound forms of belongingness, is that with the right (or even just a better) form of belongingness, suicidal outcome may in some instances be prevented. Yet another conclusion to draw is that cultural issues factor into incidences of suicide within culture-bound communities; for example, *seppuku* in Japanese society (Mäkinen & Rojas 2021). Symbolic and narrative representations of *seppuku* (also known as hara-kiri[74]) featured in the widely acclaimed 2024 TV series *Shōgun*,[75] breathing new life into an ancient way of death. *Seppuku*, a traditional Japanese variant of ritualistic suicide involving disembowelment of oneself with a sharp knife or short blade, was originally exclusively practiced by the *samurai* as part of their code of honor. *Seppuku*, within the Japanese sociocultural context, is/was considered an honorable way to end one's own life, to atone for one's wrongdoings or to avoid disgraceful alternative outcomes. In other words, suicide was deemed a preferable fate than living with shame. While the relatability of *seppuku* wanes beyond the sociocultural borders of Japan, shame as a psychopathological determinant of suicidal ideation is certainty worthy of extrapolation for wider application.

The link between attitudes to suicide and cultural norms/values/beliefs warrants further scrutiny, to appreciate the scope of suicidality across the global sociocultural landscape. Returning to the normativity of shame, a cultural norm featuring prominently in Japanese society, we see how avoidance of shame is a significant contributing factor with respect to the *hikikomori* phenomenon, where subjects withdraw from the social world for extended periods of time, often due to their perceived maladaptive ineptitude in fitting into society. In what Yong and Nomura (2019) claim to be "the first study to show that being *hikikomori* is closely associated with … suicide risks", the authors found certain common traits of the phenomenon: subjects are "more likely to be male, have dropped out from school, and have a history of previous psychiatric treatment" along with

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[74] URL = <https://mai-ko.com/travel/japanese-history/samurai/harakiri-and-suppuku/>
[75] URL = <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2788316/>

them being "less likely to reside in a neighborhood filled with business and service industries" (Yong & Nomura 2019: 6). As a result, the *hikikomori* may experience difficulties in connecting and interacting with others, perhaps due to shyness, awkwardness, social anxiety, and so forth; or perhaps the umwelt in which they reside provides scant opportunities for reaching out (even if desired).

Yong and Nomura (2019) further found "an association between hikikomori and interpersonal difficulties indicat[ing] that hikikomori fear people and the community that they know" (Yong & Nomura 2019: 6). This is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, the *hikikomori* may not be quite as lonely as they think they are or clam to be (in view of the fact that there are others they *do* know); they simply struggle to connect with these others. Secondly, having ties to community in certain cases appears insufficient to buffer against suicidal ideation or prevent suicidal behavior. Thirdly, the link between anxiety and suicidal ideation among the *hikikomori* remains nascent and un(der)explored in academic scholarship. Data analyzed by Yong and Nomura (in a rare study exploring this link) has revealed that, of the *hikikomori* assessed at health centres, "one-third of the subjects are diagnosed with schizophrenia, mood disorders, or anxiety disorders" (Yong & Nomura 2019: 2). Furthermore, "anxieties in hikikomori may be related to poor self-identity that developed during early adolescence" and associated with "difficulties blending in with others and fitting into a group" (Yong & Nomura 2019: 6), leading to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and poor self-esteem. Given that "high self-esteem is associated with lower risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors in both adolescent and adult populations" (Kleiman et al 2018: 150), we can deduce that self-worth mediates suicide risk. The link between anxiety and suicidal risk has been further identified in an analysis of the *hikikomori* phenomenon in China, with one such study finding that "anxiety was significantly severer in patients with current and past hikikomori states" (Hu et al 2022: 7), providing additional corroborative heft that anxiety is implicated in suicidal ideation where *hikikomori*-like symptoms are present.

Yong and Nomura (2019) conclude their study with the observation that "encouraging their sense of belonging to the community and helping them to reason with their fears have been shown to be effective for improving communication skills among the hikikomori, thus leading to recovery" (Yong &

Nomura 2019: 6). Indeed, hope is at hand that nudging (Pettigrew 2019)) suicidal agents toward embracing pro-belonging drives may help nip suicidal ideation in the bud. To this end, let us juxtapose responses to suicide risk in the Japanese cultural context with how suicidality is tackled in Māori culture:

> "In New Zealand, Māori culture is deeply embedded in one's sense of belonging and includes *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whenua* (land), and *whakawhanaungatanga* (the acknowledgement of whakapapa as the framework that connects people to one another, to generations past and future, and to the wider environment). There could be a considerable benefit in using cultural ideas as a foundation for belonging and using this to address high rates of suicide in Indigenous populations." (Hatcher 2013: 435; original emphasis)

From this analysis, we can surmise that an indigenous sense of identity-based connectedness is "not just about belonging in the present day but also belonging or being connected to something in the past" and "not just an idea of present relationships but also a cognitive and affective map of identity that answers the question, 'where do I belong?'", where belongingness pertains to "a history, a place, a family, or some other piece of shared identity" (Hatcher 2013: 435). Fostering a better or greater sense of belonging through community connections is a viable pathway, in certain contexts, to overcome suicidal ideation, in view of enhanced possibilities to satisfy one's existential needs.

Based on foregoing studies, we can extrapolate that suicidal ideation is largely characterized by unmet existential needs, many of which would otherwise be accessible in, and afforded by, a well-scaffolded way of life in a socially connected environment. When (de)privation of resources is taken into consideration alongside other factors, such as depression, boredom, and loneliness, the risk of suicidal ideation is significantly exacerbated. Lacking a sense of belonging and the associated safety net of a support network renders a suicidally inclined agent particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, with modern society becoming increasingly socially mobile, greater transience begets social dislocation. Social networks become disrupted as people relocate for various purposes: work, education, romance, and so forth. Opportunities to gather greatly diminish. Disruptions in social connectedness may lead to wholesale untethering from society. With an abundance of ways in which socially disconnected agents develop suicidal ideation, there is much cause for concern.

The wide array of studies on suicidality referenced above indicates that suicide is a multidimensional phenomenon: a psychopathologically significant condition characterized by “etiology [that] is multi-causal and complex” and a “combined, interactive product of physical, neurobiological, psychological, psychiatric, and social forces, etc.” (Maris 2019: 15-16). To get to the heart of suicidal ideation, we need “a language by which to make sense of how suicide is connected to particular kinds of unliveabilities” (Cover 2020: 572). Doing so allows us to make sense of how suicidality becomes “the adopted logical response to perceiving oneself as having a life that does not meld with the kinds of socialities and social participations that are demanded as part of subjective coherence, intelligibility and recognisability” (ibid.). in other words, suicidal ideation is *scrutinizable*.

Having scrutinized a variety of ways in which an unbelonging agent is far more likely than a belonging agent (whose existential needs are met or otherwise accessible) to have unmet existential needs, we can appreciate how an unbelonging agent is thereby rather vulnerable to suicide risk. Thus, in dealing with a suicidal patient, “an assessment of the severity of psychic anxiety, panic attacks, agitation and insomnia should be a standard element of a suicide risk assessment”, whereby detection of symptoms thereof is followed by addressing these symptoms as “immediate treatment targets” to facilitate “managing the patient as an acute high risk for suicide with appropriate support and safeguards” (Fawcett 2012: 29). To this end, the search for meaning helps anchor an agent struggling with poor mental health in this world – the world of the living. Having anchored herself, the need for meaningful lived experiences acts as a compass for orientating her toward belongingness, pointing the way as she navigates spaces that push and pull her affectively. As an agent aligns and positions herself within the matrix of scaffolded affordances, poised for embodied action as she calibrates her existential trajectory (think of it as a kind of "life path GPS"), her embeddedness in her environment reveals how well-attuned she is within her sphere: a sphere of being that is (ought to be) the world to her. Within this sphere, a world of opportunities awaits to be unlocked (and unblocked): opportunities made possible by the re-establishment of the five (or perhaps six) pillars of belongingness.

Re-establishment of the sixth pillar of belongingness—significance—may be particularly vital for suicidal agents who value the spiritual aspects of private and communal life. An overview of social theories of suicide found that higher levels of religious and familial integration correlated with lower suicide risk (Mäkinen & Rojas 2021). Spirituality may be conceptualized as a personal quest to unlock life's mysteries (Koenig et al 2001); for example, understanding the meaning of life, discovering one's life purpose, having experiences of a sacred/mystical/transcendent nature, and various other pursuits in the endeavor to answer ultimate questions about the unknown and "the great beyond". To this end, "a sense of spiritual well-being may be applied to suicide prevention efforts" (Kopacz et al 2014: 135), considering how "religion and spirituality may influence the attitudes and beliefs people have toward experience of distress and illness and the way they cope with it" (Mandhouj 2017: 455). For example, "what happens beyond death is likely to influence motivation to die" (Mandhouj 2017: 451). Additionally, spiritual beliefs can help foster positive feelings, thoughts, and rituals, in so doing enhancing one's sense of inner peace, personal fulfilment, and overall well-being (Mandhouj 2017: 462). Developing or tapping into spiritual beliefs can provide a viable pathway out of the trappings of suicidality. Indeed, various such therapeutic lifelines abound for treating an array of different adverse mental conditions implicated by varieties of unbelongingness – a topic addressed in the following section.

5.4: Overcoming Unbelongingness – Psychedelics, Psychedelic-Based Therapies, and Transformative Transcendent(al) Experiences (TTEs)

The purpose and goal of this research has been to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenology of lacking a sense of belonging, with a view to applying this framework in shedding light on certain aspects of common mental health problems. In this spirit, the research presented here would be incomplete without a section dedicated to solutions to the problem of

unbelongingness and its resulting ailments. Feeling out of place, which can be framed in terms of illness, is a dilemma that can certainly be overcome. In the following discussion, I opine that the use of psychedelics (hallucinogens)—a class of psychoactive substances that produce changes in perception, mood and cognitive processes (Nichols 2016)—for therapeutic purposes is an exciting prospect (if not *the* most promising avenue we have at our disposal) in providing relief, transformation, and healing for the afflicted, in the hope that loss of belongingness can be restored. A recent study found that psychedelics are "unlike any treatments currently available", having "inspired new hope" with their "broad therapeutic potential" and ability to "produce sustained therapeutic effects following a single administration" (Vargas et al 2021: 1). In view of this, it is arguable that psychedelic use is potentially therapeutically more effective than conventional pharmaceutical medicines (e.g., various antidepressants and painkillers) in treating mental health conditions implicated in psychological struggles with unbelongingness.

Now for a quick disclaimer: the perspectives presented in this section, despite the underlying optimistic tone, is by no means a wholesale endorsement of psychedelics as a magic wand. Rather, the motivation here is to highlight the variety of ways in which psychedelic use brings out positive changes—new possibilities and opportunities, new ways of being-in-the-world, new ways of apprehending people/objects/events, and so forth—through what I call *transformative transcendent(al) experiences (TTEs)*. Experiences of transformation are personally meaningful and imbue you with a sense of significance. The sense of oneness experienced at the peak of a "high" can be meaningful and blissful (Kałużna et al 2023); for example, opening you up to entertaining the idea of a higher power, feeling like you matter (e.g., someone or something is somehow looking out for you somewhere). Interestingly, these descriptions of bliss seem to mirror the type of spiritual connection that religious people describe with respect to communion with God or some other deity. Mystical experiences induced by psychedelics have been reported to produce personal transformation (Petrement 2023) and improvement in mental health (Kangaslampi 2023), revealing new pathways for recovery and healing beyond the scope of that which standard medicines, treatments, and therapies may be able to provide. The argument advanced throughout the following discussion,

therefore, is that *psychedelics have the transformative potential to enable and empower unbelonging agents to regain access to the (five/six) missing pillars*.

Psychedelics—and mind-altering substances more generally—have garnered increased attention in recent years for their potential medical benefits. According to researchers in the field of psychopharmacology, we are currently in the throes of a "cultural zeitgeist" with respect to the use of psychedelic drugs (Carhart-Harris et al 2018). LSD (aka "acid") and psilocybin (the psychoactive compound in "magic mushrooms") have proven to ameliorate the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, and anxiety (Roth & Gumpper 2023). Even cannabis,[76] the most widely used drug in the world, known for its recreational and medicinal properties, has been found to slow cognitive decline in patients with dementia (Chen and Wong 2023). Furthermore, psychedelics have reorientation and revitalization effects that can benefit an unwell agent in ways that standard forms of treatment and therapy fail to achieve (or perhaps match to the same degree/depth of effectiveness); for example, by granting an agent new perspectives that provide closure and healing. Value judgments about what is meaningful and what matters in one's life may be reconstituted in ways that are psychologically beneficial.

Take for instance a 2021 study by Timmermann et al concluding that psychedelics altered subjects' metaphysical beliefs, with a significant shift from physicalist beliefs (that the nature of reality is fundamentally physical and therefore explicable by materialist science) to non-physicalist beliefs (that the nature of reality is fundamentally non-physical, requiring other non-physical explanations) detected (Timmermann et al 2021). Subjects whose metaphysical beliefs shifted away from the physicalist toward the non-physicalist recorded increased psychological well-being, suggesting that "non-physicalist beliefs may be psychologically protective during psychological distress" (ibid.). In other words, tapping into esoteric and other non-mainstream beliefs can provide a source of comfort for some. Psychedelics have the potential to alter a patient's metaphysical worldview in ways that standard treatments or therapies have thus far proven incapable of matching or

[76] While cannabis is not usually considered a psychedelic in the same class of substances as LSD and psilocybin, it is nonetheless a mind-altering substance producing changes in mood, perception, cognition, sense of time, and so forth.

replicating. For agents seeking to overcome unbelonging-related psychological struggles, psychedelics may open new doors to recovery and healing.

Bearing these points in mind, I postulate that applying psychedelic use to treatments of (certain) mental illnesses may well provide hope for the afflicted, allowing them to reintegrate into the world in new ways. To this end, the discussions that follow opine how TTEs induced by psychedelic experiences may assist those lacking a sense of belonging: by reorientating them in, and nudging them toward, finding new intersubjective and intrasubjective connections and new methods to access missing existential goods. Furthermore, bearing in mind that "phenomenology lends reality to the notions of context and connection by considering all experience as the emergent result of our bodily contact with our environment rather than the product of an isolated brain or mind" (Petrement 2023: 37), developing a *psychedelic phenomenology* will certainly assist researchers and therapists in probing the transformative potentialities of mind-altering trips and the TTEs they induce, with a view to charting novel pathways forward toward improved interpersonal and intrapersonal well-being in newly curated and re-enacted spheres of belonging..

5.4.1 Dismantling of the habitus

Before we delve into the relevancy of psychedelics in relation to mental health outcomes, let us first revisit some key facets of belongingness. Our place in the world is shaped by inter-relational experiences: connections with others, interactions with the natural world, a variety of activities and events that we participate in, and so forth. The interactional nature of these social engagements forms the basis of our emotional embeddedness in our respective environments (Alberti 2019: 225). As we continually engage in these daily rituals, they become internalized and naturalized. And as we become increasingly embedded in our social worlds, shared norms, expectations, and beliefs become part of our respective personal identities (ibid.). The bidirectional spheres of the self and the social—their interactions, calibrations, re-evaluations—"highlight the importance of habitus, or internalized behavioural codes, which make certain ways of being, thinking, and feeling seem natural" (Alberti 2019: 226). Habitus, in the sociological literature, refers to the

constitutional and dispositional characteristics of an agent shaping, and shaped by, her perspectives and attitudes about the world (Bourdieu 1994). To have a sound habitus—to be in a general state of well-being—means being sufficiently well-adapted, well-orientated, well-attuned, and well-adjusted with respect to the social and natural environment. This means knowing how to act without needing to give much forethought. In this sense, resonant environments are incorporated environments in terms of "bodily dispositions and competences of response", in which "our bodies carry our past environments with us" (Petrement 2023: 39). In other words, in a state of belongingness, an agent is attuned to the world by way of memories and pregiven knowhow. Her habitus—"a pre-reflective common sense capable of producing coordinated collective actions and social reproduction" (Piroddi 2021: 619)—provides her with the necessary existential wherewithal to navigate through life. Hence, when the habitus dismantles, she may find herself susceptible to ill effects.

An agent who is unwell experiences her world as uncanny and unnatural, relatively speaking. She notices something being different about her environment, unnervingly so. Notice the embodied nature of experiences of illness, replete with visceral descriptions. Illness is therefore an innately bodily alienating experience, whereby

> "the unhomelikeness of illness always involves a primary alienation within the domains of our embodiment, which lends it a particularly uncanny quality (at least if the illness is severe or chronic). There is nowhere else to go, because the body cannot be left behind: the uncanny unhomelikeness strikes at the heart (primary metaphor) of existence." (Svenaeus 2011: 341)

With this passage, Svenaeus captures how illness is an intrinsically defamiliarizing experience, where an ill agent is *no longer at home in one's own body*. In the throes of illness, a patient experiences the "world-destroying powers" of alienating feelings (Svenaeus 2021: 2). Moreover, her environment too loses its homelike nature. An ill agent finds herself disposed to the world differently henceforth. Affordances are no longer available the way they once were. Navigating spaces becomes less seamless. Non-reflective tasks require more attention and effort. In a state of illness, access to the (five/six) pillars which afford an agent a lifeline and a baseline may be out of reach.

A state of unbelongingness can be a rather gaunt, bleak, and desolate existence. One can imagine an unbelonging agent spending inordinate amounts of time moping about one's situation (which goes without saying has a demoralizing and debilitating effect). Time—one's relationship with it, and one's experience of its passage—alters in a state of loneliness. In particular, time passes more slowly (or so it seems) when one is sad and lonely (Ren et al 2023); and in addition, one's social disconnectedness becomes ever more unbearable (Alberti 2019: 215). There is an embodied sense that one is out of step and out of sync with the world:

> "One way of understanding the alienating character of illness is that nature, as the temporality of our bodies, ceases to obey our attempts to make sense of phenomena: the time of the body no longer fits into the time of the self. This experience is alienating, since the body, as part of the realm of nature, is also at the centre of my own existence—a 'my-thing', which I need to fit into the temporality of being-in-the world." (Svenaeus 2011: 339)

A lonely, depressed, and unbelonging agent experiences loss of social fit as well as loss of joy. Daily activities and interactions become unsatisfying. In turn, one's place in the world becomes unsustainable in view of "inhabit[ing] a world without openness and dynamism, one that no longer accommodates the possibility of certain kinds of meaningful temporal transition" (Ratcliffe 2022: 123). The afflicted agent is unsure how to proceed, unassisted by the fact that "[t]o date, no one has systematically examined the resources and mechanisms needed to promote a sense of belonging among depressed individuals" (Fisher et al 2015: 37). Much like the global mental health crisis currently sweeping the globe, in part exacerbated by events brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the struggle to belong can be described as a crisis of meaningful connections. In directing her mood toward the world, an unbelonging agent may discover that her goals are thwarted and her interactions lack meaning, revealing the kind of affective atmosphere in which she dwells (Aho 2020: 265). Her *dasein*—how she is "already thrown into a mooded situation"—reveals the kind of meaningful possibilities (or lack thereof, as the case may be) she can interpret and project for herself (Aho 2020: 266). Perhaps she may find herself forging a new narrative identity, or simply writing a new chapter in her life story. But oftentimes this is easier said than done. Being open to new possibilities—and

having one's hopes dashed—will test one's resolve in the face of adversity. Failed attempts to belong eventually take a *psychological toll*.

The struggle to re-enact a sense of belonging is an agent's attempt to reassert her conatus in the world. She makes sense of who she can be by immersing herself in her environment: in essence, to "make sense of who I am only in relation to these embodied ways of being", for "it is only on the basis of being engaged and involved in the shared practices and concerns of others that things can reveal themselves as meaningful" (Aho 2020: 263). Experiences of resonance (or otherwise), through linking of mood and atmosphere, guide an agent on her path toward belongingness. Perhaps some pain lies ahead. Perhaps some sacrifices are required. The future is full of unknowns. Thankfully, her journey to belong may be experienced as less arduous with the right tools—at hand, and in hand—as the following subsections shall reveal.

5.4.2 Accessing new perspectives and opportunities through mind-altering substances

An unbelonging agent is, in no uncertain terms, suffering in some capacity. Whether it be loneliness, displacement, or some other form of unbelongingness, this is the kind of suffering that is synonymous with hopelessness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness. An agent thusly affected, estranged from the necessary existential goods sustaining her, may lack the resilience to help her get back on her feet again. If an agent feels irredeemably out of place, it means she is likely out of sync with—not properly attuned to—her environment. Out-of-place experiences may be described as disorientating, destabilizing, and discombobulating detachments from reality. Spatially and temporally curated possibilities for pre-reflective action and actualized goals are limited or stymied. Failed or aborted attempts to rectify this situation only serve to compound her frustration and alienation. Left with few to no options, a different kind of intervention may be warranted – to put her in good stead to have the pillars re-established.

Against this contextual backdrop, psychedelic-based therapy may provide the key to liberating an agent trapped in a cycle of despair. The right

kinds of psychedelic-based therapies can indeed break old habits and unhealthy patterns by creating new neural pathways:

> "Clinically administered psychedelics elicit rapid, robust, and sustained antidepressant and anxiolytic effects with no major apparent negative outcomes. Psychedelics modulate pathways involved in the improvement and remission of psychiatric disorders. Some pathways overlap those activated by currently available psychiatric drugs, whereas others are psychedelic-specific and result from biased signaling." (Inserra et al 2021: 256)

Caught in downward spirals and negative loops, psychedelic-assisted experiences have the potential to offer more than chemical relief: they open you up to new perspectives on life and more positive modes of thinking, make you reconsider what is important to you, and help you readjust and readapt to a world that appears uncanny to you. Take for instance lived experiences of ADHD. Patients suffering from ADHD find it challenging completing tasks, seeing as a multitude of things distract them. Living with ADHD means struggling with emotional regulation and hyperactivity/impulsivity (Haijen et al 2024). The right kind of psychedelic treatment may elevate a sense of control – reorientating a patient with ADHD toward accomplishment of the tasks at hand.

Recent studies (Haijen et al 2024; Haijen et al 2023; Haijen et al 2022) on ADHD patients administered LSD and psilocybin, for instance, have so far been promising in increasing conscientiousness as well as improving focus and mindfulness. Microdosing—ingesting a tiny amount of a psychedelic substance (e.g., LSD, psilocybin)—has been found to improve emotional regulation in ADHD patients and reduce ADHD symptoms in patients with severe ADHD symptoms (Haijen et al 2024). Recent research by Haijen and colleagues (Haijen et al 2024; Haijen et al 2023; Haijen et al 2022) marks an important step in the evolution of psychedelic research, seeing as previous evidence of the benefits of microdosing mostly derived from anecdotal and conjectural sources.

Microdosing is a technique of taking a small fraction of a psychedelic substance, usually around 5-10% of a full dose (Kuypers et al 2019: 1040) – not enough for a full psychedelic trip or high, but just enough to produce an *observable behavioral shift*. The practice of microdosing is popular with those seeking mood enhancement, a cognitive boost, or an increase in creativity (Rootman et al 2021). Research on the potential benefits of microdosing,

indicating that even low doses of psychedelics can produce improved affective and mental states, suggest that we have only just begun to scratch the surface of transformative potentiality in psychedelic medicine.

The case of microdosing with respect to the treatment of ADHD is an introductory example illustrating the potential benefits of interventions from the realm of psychedelics. Just as psychedelic therapies have demonstrated effectiveness in treating conditions like ADHD, I will argue that such therapies have wider benefits for those suffering various forms of disconnection and alienation (e.g., loneliness, displacement etc.). With their perspective-changing properties, psychedelics and their therapeutic potentialities could provide hope for those grappling with prolonged feelings of unbelongingness, in view of the notion that unbelongingness is an illness of general well-being rather than solely a mental health issue. An agent having undergone a TTE may replace a world-withdrawal mode of being-in-the-world with a more world-embracing one. This often includes, but is by no means limited to, being open to the possibility of positive new interactions and experiences, gaining new insights and knowledge, and increased willingness to let go of anything that may be holding oneself back (e.g., grudges; self-doubt; past wrongs and hurts; negative emotions such as guilt, shame, envy, and so forth). An agent poised to re-encounter the social world in a more world-embracing disposition is in good stead to begin the process of reconstructing the pillars of homelike existence.

Enhanced richness and salience in encountering the world experientially, through the practice of microdosing, has thus far yielded promising mental health outcomes; for example, in mood elevation. In a 2024 study on the effects of microdosing on neural complexity, the authors found that “low doses of LSD increase neural complexity in the absence of altered states of consciousness” (Murray et al 2024: 7). In other words, a microdose of a psychedelic substance (such as LSD), a low enough dose for a non-hallucinogenic experience, nonetheless produced the kind of heightened neuronal sensitivity that induces cognitive enhancement in novelty, creativity, and introspection. Through such consciousness-expanding effects, patients administered with microdoses of LSD reported “increases in elation” and “increased richness of experience” (Murray et al 2024: 4, 7). In various other studies, improvements in mood, cognition, energy, creativity, and interpersonal

connectedness were reported (Petranker et al 2022; Lea et al 2020; Anderson et al 2019; Hutten et al 2019). Taken together, we can gather from the fact that psychedelics—even in tiny doses—produce positive changes in mental health, that help and hope are at hand for the lonely and the unbelonging.

How are psychedelic-induced positive mental health outcomes achieved, you ask? Well, for one, psychedelics alter your perceptions, and as a corollary they alter your perspectives. You see yourself, the world, and your place in it from new angles, in a different light, with a fresh lens to peer through: "through a process of 'immersive reflection', psychedelic therapy transforms not only the self, but patients' sense of reality" (Petrement 2023: 36). In this transformed sense of reality, you find yourself experiencing and therefore inhabiting the world in new ways. *With a new understanding of the world, you have a new standing in the world.* Moreover, psychedelic substances reveal that the sheer variety of health mental disorders and psychiatric illnesses requires a holistic yet individuated way of treating patients, seeing as "psychedelics' paradigm-shifting potential is in highlighting the social causation of mental distress" (Petrement 2023: 37). The lasting effect of psychedelics go far beyond their "direct psychoactive duration" and "neurological, psychological or behavioural effects", in certain cases producing a "deeper change of reality" (ibid.). When one's reality shifts (or is re-encountered as such), possibilities may be revealed.

Through psychedelic therapy and immersive reflection, an agent may experience "an expansion and re-orientation of our boundaries of action" (Petrement 2023: 37). By re-negotiating her boundaries of action—in activation of affordances—a recovering agent finds herself accessing healing possibilities previously unattainable pre-transformation. Moreover, as an agent learns to stop reacting, and instead to reflect more, she may find her tolerance to pain and suffering improving. To this end, a TTE can be characterized as "an eminently real connection to one's context or something outside our self-contained individuality" (ibid.). Since "bodily feelings are inseparable from a concomitant experience of one's actual, spatial world" (Petrement 2023: 38), an agent's embodied and embedded experiences during a psychedelic trip, where perceptions of reality are altered, have the potential to open new existential dimensions – including rejuvenated motivations for seeking belonging spaces.

Indeed, psychedelics have *alethic* properties (they make you reassess what is real/true) along with *paradigm-shifting* potentiality (they make you reassess what is important/meaningful). Patients who have undergone psychedelic treatment report "a renewed sense of connection or connectedness" to self, others, and the world in a manner in which is often accompanied by ego-dissolution and mystical experience (Carhart-Harris et al 2018: 547). Alleviation of pain, distress, and suffering may be described as equal parts transformative and transcendental, as if a higher power has laid a healing hand on you: the kind of experience that gives you "warm fuzzy feelings" and "the tingles". Thus, we can consider otherworldly experiences of the esoteric kind as "*aesthetic chills*" (highly variable yet intense emotional responses), which represent one of the purest forms of emotional peak experiences (Schoeller et al 2024a). Furthermore, "chill-inducing stimuli may have the potential to affect the core schema of depressed patients, specifically in terms of shame and self-acceptance" (Schoeller et al 2024b: 6). Psychedelic experiences, known to produce heightened emotional responses and aesthetic appreciation, have the potential to provide *new avenues of therapeutic intervention* in patients suffering from conditions like depression through "cognitive restructuring" and "positive cognitive and emotional relearning" (ibid.). Thus, a transformed agent, willing to embrace a new way of being-in-the-world, may find that her new lived experiences alter her embeddedness in her social environment in positive new ways.

A previously unbelonging agent, her reality having been transformed positively, may henceforth find herself reorientated in the trajectory of improved social embeddedness. *A world that previously pushed her away now draws her in, with new possibilities for action appearing.* Psychedelics—in activating neural mechanisms causing profound changes in perception, cognition, and mood—have proven potential in generating "enduring changes in brain networks" (Kwan et al 2022: 1413). These changes may give rise to beneficial effects on patients' behaviors; for example, in negotiating new boundaries with the social world, adopting a more positive outlook on life, and reorientating toward more homelike pastures. Think of the possibilities for future treatments; for example, administering psilocybin to those with *hikikomori*-like symptoms

and studying whether this treatment results in reduced loneliness and/or social anxiety, with a view to applying this interventional framework to other conditions.

In treating unbelonging patients, there are several targets for intervention: anxiety, loneliness, PTSD, ASD, BPD, schizophrenia, depression, various moods disorders, substance abuse cases, and certain addictions (e.g., alcoholism, gambling, etc.). Thus far, some of the most promising developments in the treatment of mental illnesses with psychedelics can be found in patients with depression. Given the "multifaceted nature of depression", this "calls for a psychological treatment approach that integrates cognitive, behavioral, affective, and interpersonal components" (Fisher et al 2015: 37). In living with depression, "attempting to think or behave differently take a huge amount of effort because they do not 'make sense' in their depressed world, and failing only underscores their sense of despair and difference from everyone else" (Petrement 2023: 39). For a depressed agent to convalesce, she needs to be convinced that she is able to re-establish a connection with the world in ways that *makes her feel understood*. Psychedelics, in this regard, may provide her with the clues, insights, and answers she seeks/needs to make this happen.

In recovering from depression, an agent recognizes that she need not contain (limit) herself within her body, but rather extend herself out into the world and re-engage with it. In this manner, a transformed agent recalibrates her place in the world by renegotiating her boundaries of action. New affordances may emerge, facilitating refamiliarization with her environment. The streets she walks each day, previously inducing dread and despair, may henceforth become *enlivened with new meaning*. In fact, as she re-encounters old (i.e., familiar) spaces in new ways (via a reframed mindset), she may find (a) that meaning is activatable anywhere she puts her mind to, (b) that affordances were there all along, waiting to be unlocked, and (c) that when it comes to the imbuement and instantiation of meaning, the sky is the really limit (or perhaps there are no limits after all). Indeed, there is a saying that "when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change"; this is an apt description of how an agent perceives her environment, post-transformation.

Note that the objects of perception do not morph in a compositional content per se; rather, an agent's feelings toward, and experiences of, these objects change. By perceiving the world in new ways, an agent's altered reality

takes the form of an *existential shift* – one in which there is “a change in the structure of the possibility space we inhabit” (Petrement 2023: 40) in a manner that makes sense to her, such that the world henceforth (post-treatment) appears to solicit her participation in ways it hadn’t before (pre-treatment). In therapeutic outcomes where a patient experiences a shift in perception of meta-reality—i.e., a *metaphysical shift*—one may find further sense-making and meaning-making possibilities appearing in the horizon of one’s awareness and in one’s re-encountering of the world in novel and refreshing ways.

With new possibilities being revealed, a recovering patient is better poised to rebuild the missing pillars of belongingness. For a recovering patient, the rebuilding of the pillar of freedom plays a vital role in restoring a sense of *agency*. Given that “freedom is known through our capacity to capture and bring out the specificity of particular values, feelings, and actions” (Altamirano 2021: 63), psychedelic transformation can have a liberating, emancipatory effect on the affected patient when she is empowered to be herself once again, unencumbered by the debilitating and immobilizing effects of illness. The effects of psychedelics on neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain’s neural networks to change through growth and reorganization) after single and repeated doses demonstrate therapeutic potential for stress-related disorders, acting as rapid antidepressants (de Vos et al 2021), thus surpassing the effectiveness of certain existing medical interventions. Another study found that psychedelic use increases neuroplasticity and self-determination, opening up new possibilities for improved agency and positive behavioral changes; for example, breaking the shackles of bad habits, reorientating oneself toward healthier lifestyle choices, and so forth (Teixeira et al 2022). Unshackled agents are better poised for re-engagement with the social world and reconstruction of the (five/six) pillars, having been nursed back to health (or, as the case may be, a better state of health) through individually targeted therapeutic intervention(s).

Following this line of reasoning, we can think of psychedelic therapy as a kind of physiotherapy for the mind, where old possibilities for action are restored (nursed back to health) and new ones open up; for example, in healing old (emotional) wounds and fixing broken relationships in new ways. A recent study on the effectiveness of psychedelic therapy found that discovering (and rediscovering) connectedness has long-term therapeutic effects for participants,

who “frequently mentioned experiencing connectedness – and the associated feelings of belonging, love, responsibility for others – for days or weeks following the psychedelic session” (Kałużna et al 2023: 130). Having experienced connectedness, some participants subsequently experienced improved relationships with their loved ones (ibid.). Experiencing connectedness is also associated with ego-dissolution, resulting in changes to one’s self-perception; and in some cases, healing of interpersonal relationships” (ibid.). Ego-dissolution attenuating underlying mental health issues addresses negative self-perception “by stripping away self-judgement, increasing self-compassion, and reducing public self-consciousness” (Kałużna et al 2023: 131). Through the dissolving of one’s ego and attainment of greater connectedness, a patient experiences healing on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

The most effective therapies are those tailored for the nosological requirements of each patient. For agents suffering from unbelongingness-related depression, the transformation they seek could be liberation from modes of thinking and ways of being that are holding themselves back. A transformed agent usually undergoes some form of regeneration, which often includes becoming a more authentic version of oneself, or perhaps becoming a different (better) kind of self. Thus, *the journey to recovery through self-discovery* is a multi-prong approach (one where psychedelic substances/therapies can certainly play vital roles); and by embarking on this journey, one must be prepared for all kinds of outcomes – including ones in which their old selves cease to exist (Chan 2023). For agents suffering from unbelongingness-related anxiety, the transformation they seek could be liberation from modes of thinking and ways of being that cause fear about embracing what the future holds. Perhaps the reason your ship of destiny remains moored, is because your old self (or part thereof) remains tethered to old ways of thinking and behaving. Thus, as it turns out, it’s not the ship that’s the problem – it’s the captain. Your ship of destiny has been steered by the captain of your old self thus far. The old captain has gotten the ship this far, and that’s wonderful – but it really needs a new captain—a new self, a new *you*—moving forward, to move it forward.

In the endeavor to become unstuck, a realization may dawn upon you: what if the obstacles standing in your way, or the stumbling blocks tripping you up along the way, happen to be the ones you placed there in the first place?

(Inadvertently, of course; unless self-sabotage is your kink.) From time to time, an agent may find that she is her own worst enemy. For instance, the reason she lacks social connections could be explained by her not availing herself to the social world and the possibilities it has to offer. In other words, avoidance is the obstacle or stumbling block stymieing her onward trajectory. This avoidance comes from somewhere – a *place of trauma*:

> "Each act of avoidance is to be considered a wound. With repeated avoidance, the wound becomes more profound and further "infected." Rather than being a neutral act, avoidance is our active contribution to strengthening anxiety. Avoiding avoidance behavior, then, helps to free us from anxiety's power of attraction. It seems to act as a counter-measure, disenchanting us from its spell. In other words, this welcoming attitude favors the disappearance of anxiety." (Micali 2022: 204)

Anxiety-stricken agents tend to engage in avoidant behaviors. Like depression-ridden agents, they are less willing to participate in the social world, *albeit for different reasons*. The depressed do not wish to be hurt again, whereas the anxious do not wish to invite new threats into their lives. Nevertheless, both the depression-drive and the anxiety-drive are implicated in similar desires: to feel *safe*, be *accepted* among *trusted* others, and someplace *familiar* where you are *free* (to be you, and to do you). Achieving these ends might entail learning to let go of past hurt, moving on from old ways of being, and untethering yourself from influences and networks that no longer facilitate your growth, happiness, and fulfilment. For these ends to be achievable, a recovering/recovered patient ought to have regained her sense of agency.

Conversely, lack or loss of agency may feel oppressive and disempowering – a state of affairs that can be likened to living under totalitarian rule, where freedom of movement is curtailed and spaces for pluralism are quashed (Enns 2022: 66). Tyranny reigns through enforced atomization of individuals in society, generating terrifying isolation. In unbelonging cases such as loneliness, being untethered compounds affectively similar experiences of isolation and alienation to that which citizens living in authoritarian regimes may experience – being flung out or cast out, as if you do not matter. Consider the lived experiences of those who are unbelongingly lonely:

> "The isolated, lonely masses become like the refugees of the world wars, bereft of a world to which they belong and in which their opinions matter. When they lose a place in the world, they lose distinctiveness; loneliness is a desperate experience because it is

> contrary to the human condition of plurality, which is founded on our fundamental difference from one another." (Enns 2022: 67)

A lonely and depressed agent may feel like she has no stake in the world—an absence of STAFF pillars drilled in the ground to ground her—and as such, she does not matter: there is no place for her and her way of life. As a result, for an unbelonging agent, everyday life can feel meaningless and purposeless.

A world encountered as meaningless is like a canvas torn asunder: how can one paint one's life story on torn shreds (fragments of space)? Such is the reality one faces when fissures in structures of normality create unbridgeable chasms. Or so it may seem. Enter ketamine: known colloquially as "horse tranquilizer" (although used as an anaesthetic in several animal species, not just humans); when used as a psychedelic, it has been noted for its antidepressant effects, particularly for patients with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) who are *resistant* to other kinds of antidepressants (Rawat et al 2024). The rapid onset effects of a single dose of ketamine suggest that ketamine offers a notable advantage compared with other antidepressants in the reduction of depressive symptoms within hours of administration.

Psychedelics have also been found to address depressive symptoms that intersect with other medical conditions. For example, in "the first quantitative exploration of the psychological aftereffects of a psychedelic experience in those reporting a lifetime diagnosis of an eating disorder", researchers reported that "the results demonstrate overwhelming evidence for improvements in both depression symptomology and psychological wellbeing two weeks after a psychedelic experience" (Spriggs et al 2021: 1268). Moreover, these results "hint towards a potential mediating role for emotional breakthrough during the acute psychedelic experience in these positive outcomes", particularly with respect to confronting challenging emotions, revising long-held beliefs, and addressing avoidant behaviors (Spriggs et al 2021: 1269) – suggesting therapeutical potential for those with anxiety too.

As a result of psychedelic interventions, some patients may find improved congruence in their thought processes and increased harmony in their emotional states. A recent study found that the hallucinogenic effects of psilocybin and DXM were consistently described by participants as experiences that were personally meaningful, psychologically insightful, spiritually significant,

as well as mentally challenging, compared with the placebo, with positive changes persisting for weeks thereafter (Mathai et al 2023). A similar study comparing the effects of psilocybin and DXM found that psilocybin in particular induced mystical experiences—characterized by "a combination of unity, sacredness, and noetic"—which were strongly associated with both personal meaningfulness and spiritual meaningfulness (Carbonaro et al 2020: 2301). A common theme emerging from these medical trials appears to the long-lasting impact that profound personal and *transpersonal* insights have across various domains in a patient's life following psychedelic therapy. These findings underscore the potential for psychedelics to offer new therapeutic pathways to recovery, healing, and transformation.

When we think of personal transformation, terms such as "emerging from within", "rising above", "stepping into a new you" and so forth come to mind. Personal transformation is an unfolding process punctuated with a series of transformative moments over time. in each transformative moment and experience, an agent undergoes an *epistemic* transformation on account of learning something new: something she could only have learned through this particular experience (Paul 2014: 10). Through new knowledge and understanding gained, the agent accesses new insights, perspectives, and cognitive abilities – the result of which is a change in her subjective point of view (Paul 2014: 11). When these experiences shift an agent's perspectives to such an extent that they change who she is, the experiences may be described as personally transformative in a life-changing sense (Paul 2014: 16). TTEs induced by psychedelic interventions are personally transformative in the manner in which Paul has theorized, with the additional of transcendent and/or transcendental[77] elements: psychedelic experiences may *transport* you into unexplored realms of human consciousness, within which novel experiences may prompt you to question aspects of your lived experiences and life journey which you have always held true/real/dear, resulting in you becoming a new

[77] Note that transcendental (spiritual, mystical, or esoteric; beyond the realm(s) of known reality/realities; characterized by a metaphysical quality not fully implicated in—or perceivable through—the five senses) experiences are necessarily transcendent (extraordinary; exceptional; surpassing the ordinary; beyond what is perceived as normal). However, not all transcendent experiences are transcendental, nor do they need to be. Having said that, experiences that are not only transcendent but also transcendental are likely to have a personally transformative effect of greater/higher magnitude, intensity, or profundity.

person. For example, an agent suffering from depression who holds atheistic beliefs may have a psilocybin-induced psychedelic trip where she encounters a benign otherworldly being, after which she adopts new metaphysical beliefs and embraces a more optimistic outlook on life. Armed with a sense of rejuvenation and new reasons to reach out into the social world, an unbelonging agent may discover that her efforts to rebuild a homelike existence seem less onerous.

When at crossroads in life, faced with critical decisions on personal ambitions and life goals (what they are, why they matter, how to reach them, where one can actualize them, who may be able to assist, etc.), an agent must make subjective evaluations about the best way forward – for instance, by engaging in mental simulations of a variety of possible futures based on different choices available along each path, assessing which path best maximizes one's "expected subjective value" (Paul 2014: 26) in yielding optimal outcomes. In conducting introspection and self-reflection to ascertain whether she is living meaningfully and authentically, true to her needs/desires/beliefs, and in accordance with life plans/goals (Paul 2014: 112), an agent ruminating over these matters may find that psychedelic therapy places her in the right headspace in which mental simulations of possible futures yield new understandings and insights, which in turn spur new courses of action.

For instance, only after a transformed agent has reconnected with her inner world can she thereby reconnect with the outer world as well, since "connection-to-self is a bedrock from which connection to others and the world can follow most naturally" (Carhart-Harris et al 2018: 548). Connection (and reconnection) with oneself is often reported by participants in ayahuasca ceremonies as a kind of "ego death", where one's sense of self fritters away and merges ("becomes one") with greater consciousness, higher dimensions, and the Universe – an experience usually accompanied by intense emotional responses (e.g., euphoria, bliss, liberation). Following such an experience, one sometimes gains a variety of benefits, including (but not limited to) deep healing, personal/spiritual growth, and profound insights into one's life, relationships, existence more generally, and one's place in the world.

Profound, life-changing insights sometimes come in the form of otherworldly experiences – insights that could be catalysts for overcoming obstacles and fomenting reorientation toward paths leading to the restoration of

missing pillars. In one study, ayahuasca demonstrated potential to facilitate fear memory extinction, suggesting therapeutic potential for novel psychiatric interventions in the treatment of anxiety and trauma-related conditions such as PTSD (Werle et al 2024). In another study, researchers found that "APDs [ayahuasca-induced personal death experiences] are associated with enhanced adaptive coping abilities" through problem-focused coping and better emotional regulation; and in the same study participants experiencing APDs "reported a significant increase in their sense of life fulfilment, as a result of recognizing and living in accordance with their personal values" (David et al 2023: 13). Psychedelics like ayahuasca that induce profound healing and transformation offer exciting new possibilities in the treatment of various mental illnesses and psychological disorders—for example, in helping patients discover new ways to live a more authentic life buttressed by the STAFF pillars, an outcome that may attenuate various psychopathological symptoms causing her mental strife—especially where other treatments have failed to produce similarly positive and sustainable life-changing results.

Unlike conventional medicines, psychedelic substances induce *mystical experiences* – and this is the primary distinction. A comprehensive study on the impact of mystical experiences in the treatment of mental illnesses found that patients "tend to report more positive changes in different areas of well-being and mental health when they also report having had mystical-type experiences after ingestion of classic psychedelics than when they do not report such experiences" (Kangaslampi 2023: 25). A similar study found that psychedelics, when used as entheogens (psychoactive substances with spiritual properties and used with spiritual intentions), were "correlated with mind-expansion, creativity, introspection/personal growth, and relaxation psychedelic use intentions" (St. Arnaud & Sharpe 2023: 75). Not only do mystical experiences convey particular significance and meaning; they also have the potential to alter aspects of one's personality. Further studies (e.g., MacLean et al 2011; Timmermann et al 2021) show that psychedelics like psilocybin, which induce mystical experiences, enhance the character trait of openness. Increased open-mindedness is associated with liberating oneself from "blockages" in one's relations with the world, and thus reimagining (or being receptive to) how things can be different (i.e., better) – for example, how trying new things or trying

things differently may yield more promising outcomes for a rebuilt life of belonging and a more peaceful/healthy state of mind.

In embracing “radical openness that is spirit”, one perceives how “the ground of all being is itself caught up in a process of becoming” (Davis & Steinbock 2024). Realization that one’s self is an ever-evolving life project may imbue one with a sense of hope that, even if the present state of affairs might be unpleasant or undesirable, they need not be the way things will always be. After all, one ought to strive to be master of one’s own fate. This, in essence, is what it means to be free (in a Schelerian sense): “gaining access to one’s own self” (Altamirano 2021: 73). Freedom matters for a recovering patient, seeing as illness entraps or imprisons her somewhat. Thus, transformation from a state of illness to a state of wellness involves *liberation from sickness*. In illness, a patient does not enjoy full agency. She is not in full control of her lived body. Regaining dominion over her medical condition allows her to steer herself back onto an unencumbered path toward wholeness and wellness.

In light of foregoing considerations, we can conclude that psychedelic therapy has the potential to provide promising possibilities in assisting a patient to rise above whatever ailments might be plaguing her—whether it be unresolved trauma, painful memories, distressing thoughts, debilitating shame, and so forth—by pivoting her toward a fresh worldview in which positivity and hope may be *mined in the right spaces*, and to step into a new realm of life opportunities for her to belong and thrive. In furtherance of this objective, psychedelic therapists play a pivotal role in the process of recovery, healing, and transformation – with a view to helping unbelonging agents get a (better) grip on their health and maintain a grasp on a world of healthier options.

5.4.3 The role of the therapist and therapeutic spaces

Since the turn of the century, psychedelic use has undergone a new renaissance, and as a result psychedelic-assisted therapies are becoming increasingly popular. Use of psychedelics as therapies date back to the 1950s and 1960s, when studies on the effects of LSD showed promising signs in the treatment of schizophrenia – with R. D. Laing having pioneered work in this field. Laing noticed that the schizoid person is oftentimes constituted by

ontological insecurity: the lack of a grounded sense of identity persisting through life, on account of feeling disconnected from one's body and oneself (Laing 1964). A patient suffering from schizophrenia is, in certain situations, incapable of experiencing temporal continuity. And due to ontological insecurity, she may feel threatened by even the most trivial and mundane of events. Thus, she may struggle to understand others, and similarly struggle with others being unable to understand her. Furthermore, in fearing that she may not be properly comprehended, she may become engulfed in increasingly isolating thoughts to affirm a sense of who she is. In so doing, she may experience increased detachment from reality as she experiences depersonalization.

Laing discovered that through LSD-assisted therapy, patients with schizophrenia are able to regain a sense of identity and agency (Laing 2010/1960). Laing often conducted group therapy sessions as a means of reintegrating patients with schizophrenia into society. Through these group sessions, Laing fostered a sense of belonging among his patients: a haven/fortress for sufferers of various mental illnesses to retreat to. In the company of others similarly suffering, one may feel less isolated and less misunderstood. Shared spaces of healing thus act as a buffer between one's extended inner world and the outer world which one may not yet be ready to return to. To this end, therapists play a vital role in guiding patients on their respective journeys toward recovery – particularly with respect to *integration*.

Integration of an agent with an environment may involve helping her approach potential threats and uncertainties as new possibilities for thinking and acting – what Svenaeus refers to as the creation of new meaning in life (Svenaeus 2011: 340). In other words, it is indeed possible for one to enact, for oneself, a better existence – a future where a renewed sense of belonging has been (re)discovered, for instance. To actualize this preferred outcome, a therapist may encourage her clients to actively involve themselves in group events and activities that not only improve their moods but also identify with others and recognize they are experiencing similar struggles. In an accepting environment, such as group psychotherapy and self-help sessions, "[i]ndividuals who lack a sense of belonging can identify with others and discover that they are not unique in their struggles" (Fisher et al 2015: 38). Research shows that the "development and examination of interventions aimed to enhance a sense

of belonging are likely to be beneficial in the treatment of depression”, that “[i]ncorporating sense of belonging into the treatment of depression is likely to improve outcomes and indirectly contribute to suicide prevention”, and that “it would be useful to explore the role of social involvement/sense of belonging in the aftermath of a traumatic life event” (Fisher et al 2015: 38). Inclusion of psychedelic substances in therapeutic practices, designed to help patients find new ways to belong, can be immensely useful – especially when the psychedelic trip imbues patients with a renewed sense of hope and purpose, such as possibilities for making new empathic connections or discovering new meaningful life goals. To this end, several studies conducted on the positive effects of LSD and psilocybin on patients with depression have yielded promising results, both in one-on-one and group settings, offering hope for improved mental health outcomes for unbelongingly depressed patients.

The potentially positive effects of psychedelic therapy are attributable not just to the hallucinogenic experiences themselves, but also to the *integration* of these experiences into the everyday lives of patients following therapy. Psychedelic therapy acts as a bridge over troubled waters for a recovering patient: in stepping over threats, as well as in stepping over to wherever it is the grass is truly greener (e.g., actualizable possibilities for healthier outcomes, more stable ground for rebuilding one’s STAFF pillars, and so forth). In the absence of support from therapists, a recovering patient may find herself falling over or tripping up (and not the nice kind of tripping either). As researchers in psychopharmacology note, “positive therapeutic outcomes could be jeopardised if the primary connection-to-self stage is leap-frogged, e.g. due to incomplete psychological integration” (Carhart-Harris et al 2018: 548). Thus, integrating the psychedelic experience is imperative for the seeds of transformation to sprout and eventually bear fruit.

To understand what integration means with respect to psychedelic therapy, we can take guidance from the following definition:

> “Integration is a process in which a person revisits and actively engages in making sense of, working through, translating, and processing the content of their psychedelic experience. Through intentional effort and supportive practices, this process allows one to gradually capture and incorporate the emergent lessons and insights into their lives, thus moving toward *greater balance and wholeness*, both internally (mind, body, and

> spirit) and externally (lifestyle, social relations, and the natural world).” (Bathje et al 2022: 4; emphasis added)

Orientating oneself toward greater balance and wholeness in life may require the assistance of a therapist. Take for instance patients with schizophrenia, for whom transparency in social interactions is diminished or absent—in the way Colombetti and Krueger (2015) have described them (Colombetti & Krueger 2015: 1170)—and who therefore require specialized care in re-integrating into the social world. Therapy can help a recovering schizophrenic shift from disembodiment, fragmentation, and detachment toward being a unified whole; and in so doing, help the patient deem herself worthy of being accepted for who she is, with a positive therapeutic outcome being the patient’s recovery of a sense of self (Galbusera et al 2019: 238, 241, & 246). A patient having regained a sense of self is henceforth psychologically equipped to begin the task of enacting a new homelike existence.

Despite the fact that psychedelic substances can play a positive transformative role in the lives and lived experiences of patients suffering a variety of mental illnesses, there is no one-size-fits-all magic potion for all ailments (Greń et al 2023). Some patients will benefit more from certain kinds of therapies than others. Research in the healing potentialities of psychedelic substances is still nascent in many respects, and as such we must proceed with caution. For these reasons and more, therapists working in the field of psychedelics for better therapeutic outcomes for patients need to be well-trained and well-informed. This feeds into the curation of therapeutic spaces to be as conducive as possible for patients to convalesce and heal. Thus, when one steps back and withdraws from society to get better, we say she retreats (verb); and in this same manner, note how retreats (noun) can also refer to places where patients feel safe. A therapeutic space is therefore a retreat in this sense: a haven from the world’s woes, where a patient is empowered—with the assistance of therapists, where appropriate—to reconceptualize her *Weltanschauung*: a new architectural blueprint for building a new life, from which she may be able to scaffold a more homelike future, for herself.

In a safe space—such is the therapist’s office, a wellness retreat centre, and similar places of healing—a patient ought to feel free to divulge her medical history and recount painful lived experiences (e.g., childhood trauma, spousal

abuse, etc.) in a non-judgmental and non-confrontational manner. To this end, it is important that a therapist builds *trust* and rapport, first and foremost, with her patients, in designated spaces for recovery. In this regard, therapeutic spaces are necessarily also temporary spheres of belonging where the STAFF pillars are in place for a variety of recovering patients to access, until they are steady and ready enough to face the outside world on their own. In these safe therapeutic spaces, with STAFF pillars to lean on, patients should be encouraged to reveal themselves to therapists and open themselves up to healing possibilities despite being in vulnerable states of mind.

For instance, in dealing with anxiety, the therapy session may be designed around such desired therapeutic outcomes as "highlighting the errors of thought (false assumptions) about the actual probability of the event and the severity of the damage", given that "there is a tendency to overestimate the significance of the possible dangers, assuming an unfounded negative outcome" (Micali 2022: 204). For anxiety-stricken patients, they may, for instance, require a degree of nudging from assigned therapists to help them formulate new positive narratives about themselves (e.g., that they are more capable of navigating the social world than they are perhaps willing to give themselves credit for), thus emboldening the patients to re-counter the social world with new hope and self-assuredness. Given how important identity is to one's place in the world, narrativity—the recounting and reconstruction of life stories—ought to be central to any therapeutic practice, where the desired outcome is finding a new sense of belonging. In this manner, patients recovering from anxiety ought to be properly equipped to face the world in such a manner that precludes avoidant behaviors and behavioral tendencies.

An ill agent experiences herself, her way of life, and the world she inhabits as disordered. Her life stories too become chaotic. Finding new meaning and meaning-making possibles may help a covering agent overcome the vicissitudes of a disrupted life. After all, '[t]he ill person is seeking a new order, an order that will make life understandable and possible to endure again; she is searching for a way from unhomelikeness to regained homelikeness in her being-in-the-world" (Svenaeus 2011: 399). When treating anxiety in a patient, for instance, a therapist may coax her into embracing discursive meanings and existential possibilities that may have previously been concealed

by (i.e., buried deep within) her mood structures, hence previously affectively out of reach. An appropriate response, therefore, may involve a radical overhaul of one's identity, bearing in mind Heidegger's insights that in order for the possibility of "taking it back" to be actualized, one must be willing to relinquish identities and lifestyles that are no longer liveable (Heidegger 1962: 355). To reclaim or rediscover oneself, perhaps one must first lose/shed one's (old) self. Indeed, perhaps the time has come (is right) to leave the old captain of the ship of destiny behind; he sealed his own fate anyway (so screw him). The *new you* captaining this ship has new horizons to explore in more "STAFF-like" lands where the possibility of building a new homelike existence is likelier.

Therapeutic spaces, in empowering recovering patients to re-scaffold their inner and outer worlds to reflect each other, make a difference in mental health outcomes by harnessing the transformative potential of language. The right words can therefore have the right kinds of therapeutic effects. Moral support could take the form of a few kind words or an empathetic demeanour from the therapist. After all, "a word can have a mere transaction role, or alternatively—if uttered in the right circumstance, in the right way, and to the right person—it can very well be a repository of value" (Altamirano 2021: 28). For example, the right words spoken/used could well be the keys that unlock a patient's access to aspects of her inner world that previously shut her out. Thus, through psychedelic-assisted therapy, a patient may have more seamless access to her inner voice (aka intuition or conscience) informing her about the things/people in life that/who matter to her, as well as what is in her best interests (right needs, goals, etc.) (Altamirano 2021: 63). Sans the existential noise of the outside world, the inner voice can speak more loudly and clearly.

Moreover, psychedelic-assisted therapy helps patients deal with that which they would rather not: namely, confront their fears and painful memories, process negative emotions and thoughts, and accept difficult experiences and the things they cannot change (Petrement 2023: 41-42). Psychedelic experiences open patients up to new sense-making possibilities, by confronting the ailments they wish to overcome (e.g., in the case of social anxiety, tracing the root causes of their withdrawal from others and sources of disconnection form the social world), and henceforth allowing them to redefine their relationship with others and the boundaries between the self and the world

(Petrement 2023: 42). In this manner, transformation necessitates *surrender*: facing the music, giving in, and letting go. Being trapped by the past means letting yourself be amplified by the past. Surrender is liberation. Conversely, avoidance is prevarication. Avoiding difficult thoughts and matters does not negate them; they will simply continue to fester away and affect you in various ways, some of which may not be immediately obvious to you or within your horizon of awareness, since they may have already become embedded in the structures of daily routines. Sometimes what it takes is intervention by a third party—an appropriate therapist, assigned to assist you—to wake/shake you up and help you stay on course toward recovery.

A therapeutic setting conducive for recovery should make a patient feel right at home: a warm and welcoming space in which she feels a sense of acceptance and trust, where she feels valued and appreciated, and where the mutual rapport enables the therapeutic work to deepen (Fisher et al 2015: 38). Put differently, an appropriate therapeutic setting ought to feel homelike on account of STAFF pillars being present for a recovering patient to lean on when life drags her down; someplace to ground herself when waves of negative thoughts and emotions throw her off-guard and capsize her ship of destiny. Within this healing space, the plan is for patients to be nurtured back to health with a view to reintroducing them into the world.

A patient on the road to recovery, assisted by her therapist, learns to reacquaint herself with the necessary knowhow to navigate the social world seamlessly once again. Great care must be shown to the patient during the integration process, particularly where her psychedelic experience contains "ontological shock": "a state of being forced to question one's worldview, which might result from the radical alternation of everyday perception and informational overload often occurring under the influence of psychedelics" (Greń et al 2023: 2). Integrating a confounding, earth-shattering experience is an oft-protracted process of *"pulling yourself together" to become whole again*. The therapist may be called upon to provide "calming down and grounding techniques" where "undesirable symptoms" such as restlessness and agitation develop (Greń et al 2023: 9), seeing as adverse reactions do occur every now and then. The integration process may be assisted by "reviewing one's original intentions for the psychedelic experience, determining which integration

practices are most relevant, committing to regular integration practices, identifying relationships and communities that can support integration, carving out time for integration, and creating or finding physical spaces at home, public spaces, or in nature that support the ongoing unfolding of psychedelic experiences over time" (Bathje et al 2022: 9). Upon release from therapeutic care, a recovered patient—having regained a sense of agency—is henceforth better poised for re-immersion into the world: positively transformed, with a new lease on life, and ready to implement new lifestyle changes, in the endeavor to steer her ship of destiny on course toward more homelike harbors.

5.4.4 Nudging, rejuvenation, and personal empowerment

A patient suffering from adverse mental health is likely in a vulnerable state of affairs, and thus ought to be treated with the greatest degree of care and sensitivity. Often, interventions are justified on the basis that the patient may not be making the best decisions for herself. In other words, there are reasons to doubt her state of mind. This is, of course, tricky/dicey territory to wade into. Moreover, we need to be wary of intervening "for someone's own good", seeing as the path to hell is often paved with good intentions, as the saying goes. Besides, how is "own good" adjudicated? Good, in what way? To what end? And for whose benefit – the patient's current self, or her future self?

Bearing these considerations in mind, it is possible to mount a reasoned argument for an agent—whose life is heading in the "wrong" direction—to be ushered or guided in a different (better) life trajectory. Perhaps she has made a number of life decisions which can only be described as unwise. She may not realize (or indeed welcome) it, but she might well be unwell and thus in need of help: to be *nudged* toward more prudent decision-making, without her agency being negated. In other words, the agent likely needs to make better life decisions; and she needs to be encouraged to make these on her own.

To this end, I introduce Pettigrew's concept of nudging (Pettigrew 2019; Pettigrew 2023), which falls within the larger ideological framework of *libertarian paternalism* first proposed by Thaler and Sunstein in 2003. The basic idea in Pettigrew's account is that "it is sometimes legitimate … to nudge people to make choices that they know will result in personally transformative experiences

and subsequent changes in values", with the caveat that "the bar the nudger must clear is high" (Pettigrew 2023: 19). In other words, a hight threshold must be met before nudging is deemed permissible (morally justifiable and ethically sound). While Pettigrew's theory is utilized in the realm of political philosophy and public policy—nudging citizens toward making good/better decisions—it certainly has application beyond the scope of politics. Applied to the fields of psychiatry and therapy, nudging—when coupled with proper psychedelic use—may have the potential to enhance and expedite the post-TTE integration processes of agents and thereby improve their agency. From a normative perspective that "mental disorders are patterns of sense-making that … get in the way of important functions or otherwise disrupt a person's mode of functioning in the world" (Nielsen 2023: 122-123), the right kind of nudging can certainly steer a patient in the right direction toward recovery and healing; for example, words of encouragement and individually-tailored therapeutic techniques aimed at breaking old habits and overcoming debilitating negative thought patterns. A ship of destiny pointing in the wrong direction or bogged down in difficult waters may enquire appropriate environmental and social forces to steer it back on course again.

There are two motivations to be considered here. Firstly, the overarching reason for favoring controlled and cautious intervention in the treatment or therapy of a patient with anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation is to *empower* her to make the right decisions that are in her best interests. Secondly, all possibilities—a range of different courses of action to take, moving forward—must be presented to the patient, with the potential benefits and risks of each path carefully outlined to her (this is where the nudging takes place). The degree of nudging administered will be determined on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the needs of each patient. Nudging will be most effective when the information that the patient is presented with (i.e., pitched) is done with minimal persuasion but nonetheless framed in terms of desired outcomes (realized goals) – bearing in mind that the patient's consent at each step of the process (integration journey) is paramount.

Indeed, a patient's *consent* must always be a foremost consideration: she needs to be fully informed and aware of whatever procedure she is being subjected to, even if it is supposedly "for her own good". Ideally, some balance

ought to be struck between a therapist guiding and instructing a patient and allowing a patient to exercise her own agency and autonomy. Perhaps the lesson here is that the right kind of nudging of a patient toward recovery and healing is achieved when a therapist understands certain aspects of the patient's *Weltanschauung*. For example, taking note of a patient's spiritual worldview as part of a suicide risk assessment process "may allow clinicians to figure out the meaning of life of their patients, their purpose in life, their motivation to stay alive, the quality of their social support, as well as their vision concerning what happens afterlife" (Mandhouj 2017: 451). Knowing this about her patient—that she may well have reasons to live, but lacks the confidence and self-belief to enact more positive future outcomes for herself—enables the therapist in tailoring an appropriate plan of action for the patient to implement in her daily life as she navigates her own way forward in life.

Life is full of unforeseen existential challenges. One bad life decision, in hasty response, can lead to another; soon you are down a slippery slope into perilous territory. Take for instance an international student, getting acquainted with life in a foreign city, struggling to fit in. He is susceptible to a variety of ailments that impinge on his personal well-being: low self-esteem, social anxiety, poor diet, insomnia, bad habits, and so forth. Over time, he has become reliant on alcohol as a means of coping. Suffering from poor self-worth, he drinks to numb the pain. From time to time, he plucks up the courage to head into the city's entertainment districts to seek out company. He picks a bar at random and tries his luck. Other than insipid small talk, none of the conversations he strikes up are going anywhere. A rowdy group nearby overhears him speaking in a foreign accent and begins teasing him. He laughs off the jibes and ignores them, but the group continues with its antics. At some point, he leaves the bar not just defeated but indignant. At this point, he decides he has had enough, retreating back into his shell once again. On other occasions, he experiences similar failed attempts to connect meaningfully with anyone, let alone being able to strike up friendships. The cycle repeats, and his cynicism exacerbates. Meanwhile, his alcohol consumption becomes more chronic and erratic, affecting his diet and sleep. As a result, his grades begin to plummet. In response, he drinks more to quell the shame and guilt. The

university's student advisor notices this downward spiral unfolding, and decides timely intervention is warranted. What should the advisor do?

In this aforementioned example, there are several intervention points. Perhaps the advisor could point the student to a range of social activities available to international students. She could gently hint that his alcohol consumption is having a deleterious effect on his day-to-day life, perhaps suggesting an appointment with the appropriate medical professional on campus. Or she could simply provide him with words of encouragement. Any of these courses of action contains an element of nudging in introducing a variety of alternative options, with the end goal being to halt and reverse the downward spiral. The technique of nudging is therefore beneficial in *transforming one's perception of embedded life possibilities* and courses of action (Petrement 2023: 43). Moreover, through counselling sessions, it may be revealed that the student could be suffering from severe loneliness (hence his dependency on alcohol). Looking for the signs and symptoms of loneliness "through material culture and the world of goods" can help generate greater self-awareness and social awareness around the condition such that the appropriate healthcare intervention is recommended (Alberti 2019: 235) for the patient to feel that he has an element of control over his own recovery.

Sometimes all it takes is the right prompt from the right person at the right time to steer someone in the right direction, such that she makes the right life choices for *herself*: necessary positive changes in the trajectory of her life, being mindful that "[e]mbodied habits … are notoriously difficult to break; so, too, is getting out of negative mind sets" (Alberti 2019: 225). In light of this, therapists use techniques in their toolkit such as CBT to elicits shift in patients' emotional responses by helping them reevaluate and redefine their thoughts and "letting-go of the tendency to stubbornly cling to the illusion that our identities are somehow grounded and secure" (Aho 2020: 269) – with a view to nudging them towards enactment of positive therapeutic outcomes (e.g., a sense of hope for a better future). Directing one's attention and intention toward reintegration usually involves concerted effort to step outside of one's comfort zone. This includes adopting new ways of being-in-the-world; for instance, socialization into a new life setting where her norms and values align with those

of her new sociocultural environment (Bardi et al 2014), as the case may be – wherever she finds a place for a new homelike existence to be built and lived.

Once again, psychedelic intervention may be warranted where substance abuse issues remain untreated or unresolved. The therapeutic potential of psychedelics has untold benefits beyond improved mental health: "psychedelics are not only beneficial in populations suffering from psychopathologies, but also for those without, enhancing social and cognitive skills such as empathy and creativity, but also general well-being" (de Vos et al 2021: 14). Psychedelics can help reconfigure and reorganize one's schemata for a more adaptive mode of navigating and inhabiting one's environment, such that the necessary and desired existential goods are accessible.

One recent study found that ketamine administered to participants with alcohol use disorder led to significant positive changes in their relationship with alcohol (Mollaahmetoglu et al 2021). Another recent study found "long-term improvements have been observed after psilocybin, which are indicative of potential usefulness of this approach for the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances" (Inserra et al 2021: 252). Given the propensity for substance dependency and abuse amongst those who are lonely, alienated, and disconnected, the right kind of psychedelic intervention coupled with an appropriate level of nudging (from a student advisor, therapist, or other qualified professional) may in certain cases be an appropriate treatment plan aimed at steering a patient toward better mental health outcomes.

Liberated from substance abuse and addiction, an agent is better poised for making better life choices (i.e., whatever facilitates re-establishment of the five/six pillars) – bearing in mind that any decision made at any given moment is a decision made on behalf of her future self (i.e., the version of herself that she would like to become in due course) to which utilities are invested (Pettigrew 2023: 9). Returning to the example of the international student, if he is shown that by assigning adequate utility to a future self that is free from alcohol dependency and a mindset free from doom and gloom, he is better poised to embrace a more positive and hopeful attitude in re-encountering the social world, where possibilities abound for satisfying his existential needs.

The ultimate end-goal of any healthcare intervention ought to be the *restoration of a patient's agency*, such that she can fend for herself when released back into the world – a world pre-scaffolded for social interaction and shared activities *for some but not for all*. A psychedelic experience in itself can be the nudge one needs to overhaul one's life; for example, from antisociality toward pro-sociality. Extrapolating from the supposition that "psychopharmacological properties of psilocybin could have had direct effects on the adaptation of early humans to their environment by enhancing their ability to live in highly social cooperative communities and participate in collaborative activities with shared goals and intentions" (Rodríguez Arce & Winkelman 2021: 2), a case could be made that "psychedelics acted as an *enabling factor* in human adaptation and evolution" (Rodríguez Arce & Winkelman 2021: 3; original emphasis). Given the enablement potentialities of psychedelics and our embodied mechanisms to activate them in the right circumstances, perhaps a case could be made that psychedelic use mediates autopoietic enhancement: improving an agent's ability to maintain herself.

For an agent to self-determine her recovery journey and actualizable future life prospects, an action plan ought to have specific and achievable goals. To this end, researchers have outlined "four interrelated psychedelic instrumentalization goals" being "management of psychological distress and treatment of health problems; improved social interaction and interpersonal relations; facilitation of collective ritual and religious activities; and enhanced group decision-making" (Rodríguez Arce & Winkelman 2021: 9). Recovering agents could therefore benefit from "a holistic approach to psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy that acknowledges the potentially therapeutic effects of psychedelic substances and simultaneously goes beyond the focus on the psychedelic substance through emphasizing the importance of the ecology of causes that surrounds the organism's interaction with the psychedelic substance" (Meling and Scheidegger 2023: 9). In other words, for recovery, healing, and transformation to be complete and comprehensive, *set and setting* (a common catchphrase used in psychedelic culture to denote the importance of both one's mindset and the social/physical/spiritual environment where one's psychedelic journeying takes place in facilitating the kind of trip one would ideally like to experience) must be properly calibrated for optimal therapeutic

outcomes. With the right set, setting, and nudging, a recovering patient is appropriately poised for re-engagement with the social world: repositioned for steering her ship of destiny into happier, healthier, and more wholesome homelike horizons.

5.5 The Way Forward: Enacting a New (and Sustainable) Lease on Life

In this chapter, I have analyzed in greater detail the link between unbelongingness and adverse mental health outcomes through a selection of real-life variabilities. Sections one to three unpack an array of different ailments and illnesses that are likely to arise from chronic unbelongingness—namely, anxiety, depression, and suicidality respectively—in an endeavor to demonstrate how feeling out of place is psychopathologically relevant and worthy of attention and intervention from a therapeutic and wellness point of view. The fourth section highlights mental health research with respect to psychedelically induced transformative experiences and outcomes, along with the potential benefits of nudging recovering patients under appropriate settings, offering hope for those suffering psychological afflictions associated with unbelongingness to see—*step into*—better days in a brighter future. Through this analysis, it is hoped that new light has been shone on how certain kinds of unbelongingness may be psychopathologically significant, with a view to finding new ways of treating illnesses relating to feeling out of place.

The path toward greener, more homelike pastures is oftentimes an Odyssean journey – fraught with all kinds of adventures and dangers. Along the journey, both mind and body may take a battering from natural elements and social forces of the world. Damage inflicted on the mind takes the form of mental illnesses: multifaceted conditions that require a multipronged approach to tackle. In this spirit, psychedelic therapy can play a vital role in treatment of mental illnesses. Psychedelics allow subjects to explore their inner world in

novel ways, in so doing generating more accurate self-reports on their understanding of themselves, their life stories, and the place in the world.

Employing a phenomenological approach in the analysis of the human condition is “the attempt to spell out meaning structures that are common to all (human) being-in-the-world”, with “[t]he concepts of tool, the lived body, attunement, temporality, and being-towards-death [as] examples of this” (Svenaeus 2011: 340). Phenomenological inquiry into the realms of ordinary and extraordinary experiences “calls us to take the transcendental question itself seriously”, with pathological cases “manifest[ing] how the things themselves appear to us … if some of our capacities were to fail”, in so doing providing “insight into what needs explaining in our experience” (Ainbinder 2019: 38) – one such example being “the pervasive sense of hopelessness and uncertainty regarding recovery that characterizes the temporal experience of depression” (Sofocleous 2023: 16). Protracted, intense, and untreated forms of mental illness such as depression and BPD may lead to more severe conditions (suicidal ideation, notably), demanding exigent intervention(s).

Given the complexities, nuances, and inscrutable aspects of psychopathology, psychedelic therapy provides new possibilities for recovery, healing, and transformation for those suffering from anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other ailments relating to unbelongingness, through a process of re-attunement, re-identification, and realignment within and between the intrapersonal and interpersonal spheres.

Let us consider how the process of recovery might unfold for a patient. Take for instance the perspective of a patient beset with social anxiety and fear of the unknown. Perhaps what she requires is an opportunity to reframe her reality in positive new ways. To this end, psychedelics may “offer new knowledge of old information, allowing appreciation of already known (or otherwise knowable) facts in deep, vivid, affectively and motivationally significant ways” (Rodríguez Arce & Winkelman 2021: 13). Moreover, “knowledge-gains” from these personally meaningful and enlightening experiences appear to be “supported by several related psychedelic-enhanced mechanisms that include curious behavior, explorative search, structure and fact-free learning, and insight and perspective change” (ibid.). New insights about yourself, others, and the social world empower you to reengage with life.

Reviewing distressing and even traumatic memories during a psychedelic trip, as challenging and confronting as they may be, nevertheless provide an “immeasurable dimension of freedom that accounts for some of the most profoundly transformative possibilities available to us” (Dumm 2008: 47). In other words, given the possibilities and potentialities for all kinds of eventualities to emerge, perhaps it is nonetheless worth taking the plunge anyway. Sure, taking a leap of faith might be a scary prospect – especially if beset with, say, intense psychache. Should you require a more conducive headspace, such as that which a therapeutic space provides, in which you can, say, face and battle your inner demons with the support of therapists and the STAFF pillars in healing spaces to lean on, new insights into how you can sustainably rebuild a new homelike existence for yourself may be revealed.

Now for some observatory comments on sustaining progress made through psychedelic and other therapeutic interventions. Partakers in psychedelic experiences are fundamentally aware of the “afterglow” effect--“riding a high” from effects of the mind-altering substances—eventually wearing off. Consequently, as one “floats back down to Earth again” so to speak, one may experience a dip in mood as one returns to the mundane normality of everyday reality. It is imperative, therefore, that progress made (e.g., insights gained, motivation (re)discovered, learning to let go, etc.) remain sustainable through the passage of time. In furtherance of this endeavor, one may find merit in developing a mindfulness practice as a sustainable way to *fortify the mind* as one navigates the unknown future.

For instance, “by practicing mindfulness the individual can reduce or stop ruminating thoughts and reclaim their experience of the future by offering meaningful possibilities for positive change” (Sofocleous 2023: 16). Mindfulness can be understood as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are” (Segal et al 2007). Research on the effects of mindfulness therapy found “a decrease in ruminating thoughts in individuals with depression”; and concurrently, “participants [who] reported decreasing ruminating thoughts … also reported lower scores of anxiety and psychological distress” (Sofocleous 2023: 17). The implication here is that practicing mindfulness can help one be “more present in daily life” such that one is “able to pursue [one’s] own goals

[and thereby] regain a sense of the future as open and as offering the possibility to actualize different kinds of possibilities" (ibid.). These new possibilities include (but are by no means limited to) "positive social interactions, particularly when a sense of belonging is felt, suggest[ing] to a person that his or her social value is high enough to feel safe and secure, allowing movement away from submissive or defensive postures to more active and exploratory motivational states" (Steger & Kashdan 2009: 297). To put it simply, being (more) mindful can help you discard habits and patterns holding you back, allowing you to *become an improved version of yourself*.

Finally, an important caveat (and note of caution). Psychedelics, promising as they are in treatment potentiality, are by no means cures or panaceas; they are tools that, if used properly, can yield promising results where none were previously achieved. A tool is normatively neutral: neither good nor bad. Outcomes—positive or negative—depend on how it is used, why it is used, and what it is used for. A knife is useful for food preparation, but it can also be used to commit acts of harm and violence. Similarly, psychedelics can be used for recreational purposes, which was popular during the countercultural era of the 1960s; however, they can also be used for nefarious purposes, best exemplified in the case of the CIA's clandestine project known as "MKUltra", where test subjects were administered LSD in a covert military mind-control experiment.[78] There are also practical issues to be considered, notwithstanding the enthusiasm (and hype) surrounding the potential health and other benefits of psychedelic use and psychedelic-based therapies. Some challenges to be addressed include barriers to access, in the form of the legal status of psychedelics in respective jurisdictions, costs of treatment, social stigma (e.g., drug use viewed as immoral among those with religious affiliation), reluctance of some medical professionals to embrace novel and unconventional forms of treatment/therapy, concerns regarding risks and effectiveness, and so forth (Wells et al 2024). Nevertheless, with wider public interest in the therapeutic potentiality of psychedelics and various other novel and unexplored therapies for better mental health outcomes, coupled with renewed scientific rigor in these topics, the future bodes well for the psychologically afflicted.

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[78] URL = <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/09/758989641/the-cias-secret-quest-for-mind-control-torture-lsd-and-a-poisoner-in-chief>.

Concluding Remarks

The drive to belong is one of the fundamental hallmarks of the human lived experience. As we make our way through life, we find a great many of life's most cherished moments are those shared (i.e., experienced together) with others who matter to us – moments marked by what Salmela and Nagatsu (2016) refer to as "collective effervescence". Indeed, the social world affords us a multitude of opportunities to have our needs met and desires satisfied. From time to time, however, the vicissitudes of life pummel our homelike existence, rendering us afraid, lonely, and unwell. Unable to maintain our grip on the social world, circumstances compel us to respond in certain ways. In the attempt to find our feet again, we rely on environmental cues and sociocultural norms to lift us up and propel us forward. Possibilities for overcoming life's struggles are mediated by access to the right resources (existential goods) and opportunities for action. When lack or loss of access jeopardizes our lifelines, we encounter the world in a diminished and distorted form. As a result, withdrawal from the social world is a common adaptive response to what can be described as "feeling out of place": an unshakeable sense that somehow you do not matter and therefore do not belong, causing you distress and unease.

Absence of belongingness, as the above case studies demonstrate, is associated with several adverse mental health outcomes, highlighting cause for concern. These considerations (any many more) motivate this research seeking to elucidate the parameters of belonging and unbelonging experiences in a variety of different contexts, utilizing a phenomenological framework of analysis, with a view to enhancing our understanding of the interpersonal and other relational factors threatening our well-being and disrupting our place in the

social world – in the hope that agents lacking a sense of belonging can navigate their way toward more homelike spaces.

There is indeed something it is like to belong. To belong is to experience a homelike existence someplace where you can *do* you and *be* you. Home is where the heart is, they say. On a practical level, home is also where you can build a STAFF-like existence for you (and your loved ones, as the case may be.) Belongingness grants you access to the existential goods you need to survive and perhaps even thrive (with a bit of luck, and maybe even divine intervention – who knows). In a state of belongingness, your place in the world is propped up by the pillars of safety, trust, acceptance, familiarity, freedom, and (in certain cases) significance (too), helping you remain afloat in an ocean of existential uncertainty. With this in mind, one of the objectives of this research has been to shed—and shine—further light on the nuances, peculiarities, and intricacies of the belongingness drive, in the hope that those who feel like they do not belong, or that they have no place in the world, are able to *find their way home* – wherever that might be, whenever that might happen, whichever the direction, with whom this takes place, whatever that looks like, whatever that means to them, and however that is achieved.

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