

Loneliness: a special issue of Transcultural Psychiatry

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By

The [October 2020 issue of Transcultural Psychiatry](#) addresses the concept of loneliness anthropologically. As the special issue editors state in their introduction:

“In recent years, loneliness has been increasingly recognized as a social issue, a public health concern, and even a global epidemic. [...] The feeling of being lonely, of being left behind, and the fear of abandonment and social rejection are all part of the human experience. Recognizing that loneliness affects a large number of people, as in the public health perspective, is a first step, but this population level perspective is different from recognizing that loneliness is a structure of sociality that impacts everyone – that loneliness is ‘everyone’s business’. [...] This special issue illustrates that the social and cultural nature of loneliness is an important area of study that requires interdisciplinary approaches and can particularly benefit from ethnography.” ([Chikako Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020](#))

The titles and abstracts of the articles are below. Open-access articles are indicated with (OA).

[Toward an anthropology of loneliness \(OA\)](#)

Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, Michelle Parsons

Loneliness, which is increasingly recognized as a public health concern, is not just a matter of individual psychology or cognition, but inherently social, cultural, and relational. It is an affective, subjective, and intersubjective reality, distinct from the physical reality of social isolation. This introduction to the thematic issues of *Transcultural Psychiatry* argues that the social and cultural nature of loneliness is an important area of study that requires interdisciplinary approaches and can particularly benefit from ethnography. Contributors explore concepts and expressions of loneliness in Japan, Kenya, Mexico, North Africa, Palestine, Russia, and the US. Cross-cutting themes include the importance of cultural

expectations, practice, place, and recognition in the experience of loneliness. Loneliness is a culturally shaped experience that is problematized and medicalized across cultures, but it may also be fundamental to the human condition.

[In the eyes of others: Loneliness and relational meaning in life among Japanese college students](#)

Chikako Ozawa-de Silva

In recent years, loneliness has become widely recognized as a public health issue that impacts negatively both on physical and on psychological health, even increasing the risk of mortality. This article focuses on the relationships between social connection, loneliness, and meaning in life that emerged from a study of suicide website visitors and interviews with Japanese college students. It poses three questions: (1) Is the need to be needed and the strong desire for meaning in life unique to suicide website visitors or shared by Japanese college students? (2) Are the need to be needed and the need for meaning in life two separate types of mental pain that lead to loneliness, or are they interrelated?, and (3) What does meaning in life look like for Japanese college students? The interviews indicate that Japanese college students greatly value being needed and that they connect it closely to a sense of meaning in life. They exhibit a great fear of loneliness and understand meaning in life in a highly relational manner, rather than a cognitive one. The article therefore proposes that in Japan, relationships, especially those that include a strong perceived sense of being needed, are the foundation for meaning in life, but that such a strong need to be needed is also a manifestation of the fear of loneliness and social rejection.

[Being unneeded in post-Soviet Russia: Lessons for an anthropology of loneliness](#)

Michelle Anne Parsons

The problem of loneliness is receiving increasing attention in the popular media and among social scientists. Despite anthropology's rich engagement with emotions and experience, the anthropology of loneliness is still scant. In psychology, loneliness has been defined as relational lack. In this article, I reconsider one culturally specific form of relational lack—being unneeded among post-Soviet Muscovites. I draw on the anthropological literature on emotion, exchange, and morality to suggest that being unneeded is an ethical commentary on a lack of recognition. During Soviet times, recognition was secured through informal social exchange practices. Being unneeded among middle-aged and elderly post-Soviet Muscovites is therefore connected to a constricted ability to

give and experience recognition. One avenue of analysis for an anthropology of loneliness is to consider social exchange practices and how these connect with societal and moral dimensions of loneliness.

[Images of loneliness in Tuareg narratives of travel, dispersion, and return](#)

Susan J. Rasmussen

This article examines how social, economic, and political upheavals in the Sahara have stimulated re-thinking about loneliness in relation to trauma from mobility, dispersion, and return home in communities of Tamajaq-speaking, Muslim, and semi-nomadic Tuareg in northern Niger and Mali. How do Tuareg, sometimes called Kel Tamajaq after their language, draw on and re-formulate longstanding and new ways of coping with loneliness in regional droughts and wars, which have driven many to alternately disperse from their communities and return to homes that are no longer the same? What is the connection between changing modes of travel, concepts of loneliness, and ways of coping with this experience? In these communities, loneliness is a recurrent theme in personal life histories—in particular, in narratives of both geographic travel and spiritual travel in medico-ritual healing—and is alluded to in poetry, song, and everyday conversation. This article explores the meanings of loneliness and ways of coping with it in this society through analysis of this emotion in symbol, subjective perception, and social experience. The focus is upon representations of loneliness in narratives by travelers who have confronted this emotion, and upon relevant Tamajaq terms often used to express loneliness: namely, *essuf* (the wild, solitude, and nostalgia); *tamazai* (approximately, a depression); and *tarama* (unrequited love), illustrating with cases and examples. More broadly, the article is guided by and builds on insights in psychological anthropology into emotion and affect as well as suffering and subjectivity.

["My own corner of loneliness:" Social isolation and place among Mexican immigrants in Arizona and Turkana pastoralists of Kenya](#)

Ivy L. Pike, Rebecca M. Crocker

This article explores the intersection of two growing health concerns: the rising incidence of loneliness and the negative health impacts of migration and displacement. To better evaluate loneliness across diverse populations, we emphasize the cultural shaping of expectations for social lives and the ways in which structural vulnerability and violence can undermine these expectations. We draw on ethnographic research with two groups of migrants: Mexican immigrants living in southern Arizona and Turkana pastoralists of Kenya who experience displacement and unpredictable mobility as a result of low intensity violence. For Mexican

immigrants, feelings of loneliness intertwine with the emotions of fear, trauma, and sadness, all closely associated with social isolation. The Turkana describe loneliness associated with the loss of their animals, or the shifting social landscapes they must traverse to keep their families safe. The culturally salient experiences described by these two communities highlight the complexity of defining loneliness. Given the pace of global migration and the number of refugees and displaced persons, closer scrutiny of how cultural expectations and structural violence interact to produce feelings of loneliness seems overdue.

[Loneliness, adolescence, and global mental health: Soledad and structural violence in Mexico](#)

Janis H. Jenkins, Giselle Sanchez, Olga Lidia Olivas-Hernández

In this article, we call into question recent public health claims that loneliness is a problem of epidemic proportions. Current research on this topic is hindered by an overreliance on limited survey data and by paradigmatic imbalance that delineates the study of loneliness to psychological, cognitive, neuroendocrinological and immunological effects, social functioning, physical health, mortality, and gene effects. The article emphasizes that scientific approaches to the phenomena of loneliness are more appropriately conceived and investigated as inherently matters for social, relational, cultural, and contextual analysis of subjective experience. Studies of loneliness and possible relationships to mental health status require investigations of social, environmental, and institutional structures as well as families, peers, friends, counselors, and health providers. This article takes a step in this direction through examining the lived experience of 35 high school students and their families living under conditions of social adversity in Tijuana, B.C., Mexico, with attention to anxiety and depression. Utilizing ethnographic interviews, observations, and psychological screening tools, we provide an overview for the group and illustrate the interrelations of subjective experience and social environment through a case study. These data reveal the vital role of understandings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety from the perspectives of adolescents themselves. We conclude that future studies of loneliness are best informed by in-depth data on subjective experience in relation to social features to advance understandings within the field of global mental health and allied fields.

[Psychological predictors of loneliness among Palestinian university students in the West Bank](#)

Filasteen I. Nazzal, Orlanda Cruz, Félix Neto

The purpose of this study was to examine the predictive role of life

satisfaction, perceived social support, and psychological problems on loneliness among Palestinian university students in the West Bank. Participants were 254 volunteer undergraduate students (50.4% males and 49.6% females), ranging from 18 to 26 years of age. Data was collected using the Loneliness Scale (UCLA), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Psychological Problems Scale and a Demographic Information Form. There was a significant gender bias towards loneliness, male students being lonelier than female students. Results showed that students who had higher loneliness, felt less satisfied with their life and perceived less support from friends, family and significant others. Furthermore, students who had high loneliness also presented more psychological problems. These results also indicated that, after accounting for psychological problems, life satisfaction, and social support from friends and significant others are negative predictors of loneliness. These findings suggest that universities should create strategies to improve well-being and social support to protect students from the negative effects of loneliness.

[New starts at New Start: Recovery and the work of *hikikomori*](#)

Ramsey Ismail

Defined by psychologist Tamaki Saito as a period of social isolation in the absence of any other clear mental health issues for a period of six months or longer, *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) emerged as a condition among Japanese youth in the late 1980s. Used as both a noun to identify those afflicted, as well as describe their condition, the word immediately captured the attention of the Japanese and international public. According to various government and third-party surveys, *hikikomori* number from approximately 500,000 to two million people. Thus, while *hikikomori* are understood to struggle with long bouts of loneliness and isolation from their peers and parents, due to constant anxiety over their inability to perform among Japan's competitive capitalist-oriented social expectations, both academics and professionals continue to struggle to comprehend exactly who *hikikomori* are and how to help them. Based on fieldwork at New Start, a non-profit organization located just outside the city limits of Tokyo that helps *hikikomori* recover, this article examines the ways residents at New Start navigate this uncertainty and gain moral agency. Drawing from over a dozen interviews with parents, clients, and staff conducted while working as a volunteer at New Start, I focus on three representative trajectories that demonstrate how residents navigate the competing discourses surrounding the clinical and social categories of *hikikomori* and NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), through which they embark on a journey from economically unproductive recluses, to productive capitalist citizens pursuing their own version of a "nearly normal" life. I argue that the various accomplishments of *hikikomori*, as

individuals and as a social category, which both support existing social relations and provide an alternative mode of fitting within them, is “the work of *hikikomori*.”

[Dislocation, Social Isolation, and the Politics of Recovery in Post-Disaster Japan](#)

Isaac Gagné

What happens when temporary shelters become permanent homes? What are the psychosocial impacts of prolonged dislocation, and how might these effects be mitigated through grassroots community activities? Based on fieldwork and interviews with residents in temporary housing and volunteer support groups in northeastern Japan conducted from 2014–2018, this article analyzes the ongoing challenges of delayed recovery, chronic dislocation, and social isolation among survivors of the March 11, 2011 disaster in Japan, with a particular focus on the residents of temporary facilities in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture. I examine how the complexity of the disaster-recovery process within the local politics of the region has produced new tensions, creating a particular “zoned liminality” for displaced residents while undermining the social nexus of community relations. Then I reflect on certain challenges in treating the psychosocial trauma among survivors, and how their particular needs are addressed through new citizen-based volunteer movements offering holistic activities. These grassroots activities do not necessarily solve the breakdown of social bonds nor improve residents’ prospects of returning home. However, by alleviating survivors’ sense of social isolation and loneliness, this “humanistic” approach highlights the possibilities of participatory-style psychosocial support that goes beyond conventional biomedical services and top-down, state-driven policies.

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