



# Exploring Student Loneliness in Higher Education

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A Discursive Psychology Approach

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Lee Oakley

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# Exploring Student Loneliness in Higher Education

“In this very timely and topical book, the author breaks with the dominant quantitative paradigm in order to focus on the detail of narrated experience of loneliness.”

—Dariusz Galasinski, *Professor of Discourse and Cultural Studies,  
University of Wolverhampton, UK*

“A timely and important work, providing sensitive and perceptive analysis into a long-neglected challenge facing students in UK higher education today. Highly recommended reading for all who seek a greater understanding of their students’ experiences.”

—Sarah Turner, *Lecturer in English (Stylistics), Coventry University, UK*

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*To my parents, Julie and John*

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# List of Transcription Conventions (from Jefferson 2004)

(.)	A micro pause
(1.6)	A pause measured in tenths of seconds
=	Latched talk, denoting a seamless transition from one turn to another
::	Elongated sounds in talk
CAPITALS	Utterances that are loud relative to the surrounding talk
<u>Underlining</u>	Special emphasis on the underlined segment
°	Degree symbols indicate relatively quiet talk
> <	Enclose sped up talk
< >	Enclose slower paced talk
↓ ↑	Indicates a fall or rise in pitch
£	Smiley voice or laughter talk
#	Creaky voice denoting upset
[ ]	Overlapping talk
hh	Audible breaths, whereas .hh indicate audible outbreaths
huh / heh	Laughter realized as breaths
‘ ’	Quotation marks signal reported speech or thought
(( ))	Double brackets indicate any other features of interest not yet captured
(unclear)	Words in brackets comprise a best estimation of what was said

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# 1

## Discursive Psychology and the Study of Loneliness

### Introduction

Loneliness is one of the most personal, and ironically one of the most social, feelings that a person can experience. It is something which affects our sense of who we are, and our place in the society which we inhabit. It affects some for only brief moments, and still others their entire lives. It is a human universal which everyone is likely to have experienced, however briefly, at one point or another in their lives. Many scholars have variably defined this phenomenon over the years as an emotion, a feeling, a perception or even as a biological mechanism for survival. What this tells us is that loneliness is a complex process which many individuals have reflected on in different ways.

In the UK, the national press report on the state of loneliness in one demographic or another almost every week. News headlines regularly talk about in metaphorical terms as an 'illness' (Alberti 2018), 'epidemic' (Easton 2018), 'plague' (Gil 2014) or even a 'disease' (Perry 2014) affecting the population. The national attention on this issue resulted in the launch of a charitable foundation in 2017 with the aim of tackling the issue of loneliness in society. The Jo Cox Foundation

was set up posthumously following the murder of the eponymous MP in the same year, and subsequently the British government revised a ministerial post so that it would incorporate loneliness. Thus Tracey Crouch, the MP for Chatham and Aylesford at the time the post was created, became ‘Minister for Sport, Civil Society and Loneliness’.

For all of the problems that it provides the individual who has lonely feelings, it is a fundamentally social problem and one which affects some members of the population in greater numbers than others. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that one of the demographics most affected by loneliness is that of young people. A report conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in October 2018 found that of the 55,000 people who responded to an online loneliness survey, the age group which had the most lonely respondents was that of the 16- to 24-year-old group (a total of 40% of people within that category). A similar study by the Office for National Statistics also found that 5% of the general population of the UK felt lonely ‘often’ or ‘very often’, confirming that 16- to 24-year-olds considered themselves to be the most lonely of all the age groups (a demographic that includes most university-age students). This reflects a general trend across the UK for loneliness to be experienced by the very young and the very old (Victor and Yang 2013). The present study then is all about the loneliness at university. It specifically highlights the accounts of students who have felt loneliness during their studies, and how they try to make sense of those experiences within research interviews. In this particular chapter, I give a brief overview of the scholarship on loneliness. I trace its evolution from the seminal work of Weiss (1973), who considered it a ‘gnawing, chronic disease’, through to present-day psychological and sociological concerns with the topic. I then introduce the methodology of Discursive Psychology, including its key principles and theoretical aims, before demonstrating its utility in studying a topic such as loneliness. I then provide details of the study used to conduct the research for this book.

## The Study of Loneliness

There has been a considerable volume of work on the study of loneliness over the past half century, from across a range of different disciplines. The work of Weiss (1973) is generally considered the starting point for

most of this empirical endeavour, and in it he argues that loneliness constitutes a person's *perception* of social isolation. He presents it as a subjective discrepancy between the amount of social contact one would like to have, and the amount of social interactions one actually has. This definition is intended to account for those individuals who are content with only having one or two friendships, and those who are miserable despite having very many social interactions. Loneliness is therefore not a topic that can be measured mechanically via the number of acquaintances one has, or the amount of hours of social interaction one participates in. It is also not a simple dichotomy between feeling lonely or not, as individuals may experience such feelings for a limited period of time but then not at all at other times. Weiss talks of it as a cline between loneliness and sociality, and one which has two sub-categorizations: 'social loneliness' and 'emotional loneliness'. The former is meant to represent the perceived absence of common ground with one's peers. This can be as large in scale as one's world view, or not sharing something as minor as a hobby one enjoys and finds meaningful. The latter type ('emotional loneliness') is construed as a perceived absence of intimacy, be this platonic or romantic. The two types are not mutually exclusive, so one may have one, both, or neither. For example, an individual in a loving relationship may lack a sufficient social circle, whilst a gregarious person might have very many friends but still yearn for a romantic partner.

This reliance on subjective interpretations is what makes the study of loneliness a particularly difficult one. It is a sensation which can be overwhelming for those who have had experience of it, yet it is virtually invisible compared to other feelings and emotions such as anger or sadness. It is not often considered an emotion (though, see Wood 1986 for a convincing counter-argument to this), yet it is derived from the same feelings and social circumstances which constitute the basis for many 'true' emotions like happiness. There has been a considerable volume of work on the study of loneliness over the past half century since Weiss' (1973) study, from across a range of different disciplines. Many early sociological studies were not as methodologically rigorous compared to the standards of today, with examples such as Seabrook (1973) and Bowskill (1977) interviewing people in their homes without recourse to either tape recorders or detailed notes. The purpose of these studies was

to capture people's everyday experiences of this feeling, and to elicit the subjective opinions the participants had for their own loneliness. There is a paradox at the heart of loneliness, though, in that one's isolation is a problem of both individuality and sociality. As an early study by Wood (1986: 191) notes:

Loneliness is both individual and social. It is individual because it refers to the person as separated; it is social because what the person is separated from is other people. It is social because it concerns, indeed derives from our capacity for, intersubjectivity; it is individual because it involves experience which is not shared, the failure of intersubjectivity.

What Wood is saying here, then, is that loneliness has internal as well as external signals. The former comprises inner feelings, and the latter represents the visible absence of social interactions. A collection of studies edited by Peplau and Perlman (1982), now considered a key text, outlined for the first time a range of approaches and theories to the study of loneliness, something which has been updated by Heinrich and Gullone (2006). More recently it has been suggested that loneliness has an evolutionary basis. Work conducted by John Cacioppo and colleagues has argued for a theory of loneliness that does not label it an emotion, but rather a mechanism for survivability in humans (e.g. Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2012; Cacioppo et al. 2014). They state that loneliness should be treated in the same way as hunger or thirst, as a drive to redress a deficit in something the body needs for it to survive, be it water, food, or social contact.

Such research has primarily treated it as a topic for psychological investigation, whereby successive generations of scholars have attempted to account for, categorize, and measure the incidence of loneliness within the general population. To this end, a self-reporting closed-class questionnaire was developed at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1978, with two subsequent revisions by Russell et al. (1980) and Russell (1996). The original 'UCLA Scale of Loneliness' (Russell et al. 1978) was designed as a means of quantifying the issue in order to gauge the scale of the problem. Over the course of the three versions, there have been numerous demographics studied in

relation to loneliness, including college students, nurses, teachers, the elderly and so on. The most recent version of the scale is reproduced below. Participants are instructed to rank their responses to each of the questions on a scale of 1–4. At the end, the numerical scores are tallied to produce a final number. Some questions (which contain asterisks) have a reversed focus on sociability, and thus the scoring for these is also reversed. The higher the final total number, the more lonely the participant is considered to be. The beginning of each question asks participants how regularly they (Fig. 1.1).

	Never = 1	Rarely = 2	Sometimes = 3	Always = 4
1.	...feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you?*			
2.	...feel that you lack companionship?			
3.	...feel that there is no one you can turn to?			
4.	...feel alone?			
5.	...feel part of a group of friends?*			
6.	...feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?*			
7.	...feel that you are no longer close to anyone?			
8.	...feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?			
9.	...feel outgoing and friendly?*			
10.	...feel close to people?*			
11.	...feel left out?			
12.	...feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?			
13.	...feel that no one really knows you well?			
14.	...feel isolated from others?			
15.	...feel you can find companionship when you want it?*			
16.	...feel that there are people who really understand you?*			
17.	...feel shy?			
18.	...feel that people are around you but not with you?			
19.	...feel that there are people you can talk to?*			
20.	...feel that there are people you can turn to?*			

Fig. 1.1 The UCLA Scale of Loneliness (Version 3)—after Russell (1996: 23)

It has been claimed that the UCLA Scale has been used in approximately 80% of all empirical studies of loneliness (Goossens et al. 2014), though this number is derived from a much earlier paper (Oshagan and Allen 1992) and therefore cannot be verified. This said, almost all of the psychological papers cited in this book draw upon at least one version of the scale, suggesting that it continues to be influential to this day.

## Loneliness in Higher Education

The past twenty years have seen a growing interest in the reported incidence of loneliness within higher education. For many students, their arrival at university marks a transformational time in their lives. They are often in a new environment, perhaps even abroad from their home country, studying a new course, and interacting on a daily basis with many groups of new people. In addition to the material aspects of studying for a degree, there are also the academic pressures which come with it, such as assignments, deadlines and other duties. Given the identities that students have come to build for themselves in adolescence (Scanlon et al. 2007), it is then perhaps unsurprising that university represents a very emotionally and socially destabilizing time for many students. As I alluded to in my opening remarks, there has been a keen media interest around university loneliness in the UK in the last few years. Could it be the case that loneliness is increasing in UK universities? And by what instruments are we measuring such rises? There seems to be an urgent need to account for this moral panic, particularly as previous studies have drawn some connections between loneliness and issues such as student retention, student engagement, and student well-being (Wilcox et al. 2005: 713).

Recent research on the topic has continued the trend for drawing upon research instruments such as self-reporting surveys, questionnaires and reflective journals to make sense of loneliness within university settings. A typical example comprises a study by Richardson et al. (2017), who deployed a range of standardized measures in an attempt to gauge levels of loneliness in university students. The purpose of the project was to correlate loneliness with a range of variables

such as mental health problems and alcohol problems. They found that 'greater loneliness predicted greater anxiety, stress, depression and general mental health over time' (ibid.: 48), and that 'loneliness induces or exacerbates symptoms of poor mental health over time' (ibid.: 52). Other studies have stated that particular groups of students are disproportionately more affected than others. Gorczynski et al. (2017: 118), for example, found that several demographics of at-risk students were likely to need different provisions of mental health support at university. Such groups comprise women, bisexuals and those students with previous experience of mental health difficulties. Interestingly, though, they found no explicit correlation between mental health literacy and students' well-being. Furthermore, a study by McIntyre et al. (2018) aimed to identify the social determinants of loneliness in a population of UK university students via an online survey. They argued that 'feelings of loneliness consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of poor mental health' (2018: 237).

The role of friendships has been highlighted as a crucial factor in avoiding loneliness at university. As Wilcox et al. (2005: 707) concluded in their study of undergraduate loneliness:

...friends provide direct emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, as well as buffering support in stressful situations. Course friendships and relationships with personal tutors are important but less significant, providing primarily instrumental, informational and appraisive support.

Other studies have drawn similar connections between different demographics of students (e.g. Stern 2017 in school children; Janta et al. 2014 for doctoral students; Sawir et al. 2008 for international students), highlighting the range of interactions that students draw upon when accounting for their loneliness. All of these studies present a picture of loneliness as highly present in education, but rarely visible. In universities, it is often difficult for a personal tutor or relevant support services to identify a well-being issue with a student until it has reached a visibly problematic point.

## Discursive Psychology

As we have seen in the previous section, the study of loneliness has been dominated thus far by psychological, and to a lesser degree sociological, approaches to the subject. The emphasis has predominantly been on accounting for why individuals feel lonely, what categories of loneliness exist, and what other cognitive and sociological variables correlate with this feeling. The present study adopts a more linguistically oriented methodology to the analysis of loneliness than has come before, one which is called Discursive Psychology (henceforth DP for brevity). It takes as its starting point a desire to 'to analyze reports of mental states, and discourse in which mental states become relevant, as social actions oriented to interactional and inferential concerns' (Wooffitt 2005: 113). This is in stark contrast to analytical approaches which attempt to see within the black box of the human mind in order to offer an account of the internal workings of loneliness. DP is thus a type of discourse analysis which concerns itself with 'how psychological avowals, attributions and implications work in conjunction with factual descriptions and normative accountability' (Edwards and Potter 2005: 255). It is a theoretically powerful way of showing how what we say is a product of the interactions we are taking part in, whereby language is considered a form of social action. DP 'rejects the cognitivist assumption that minds are revealed or expressed in what people say' (ibid.: 243), thus placing the emphasis on how people go about talking up internal categories and states for the purposes of getting things done in conversation. Cognitions are argued not to be 'stable, internally-represented, information-processed conceptions of the world' (Antaki 2006: 9) and thus do not form the focus of this kind of analysis. Instead, psychological categories are formulated as a 'mental thesaurus [that] can be studied as a kitbag of resources for doing things' (Potter 2005: 740). It should be stressed that DP practitioners do not deny the existence of one's physiological or biological processes, entities we may then imperfectly and subjectively label as various 'feelings' or 'emotions'. Rather they focus on how such labels are rhetorically designed, arrived at, and used (Edwards 1997: 171) in everyday interactions.

DP developed out of the origins of Conversation Analysis and particularly the seminal work of Harvey Sacks in the 1960s (see Sacks 1992 for a summary of his lectures). This later informed early social psychological approaches to language in work done by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards and Potter (1992), both of which may be considered foundational texts within this discipline. It has since proliferated rapidly into a field which provides insights into a range of mundane but highly important ‘psychological business’, such as accounting for one’s actions, showing desire, managing one’s sense of responsibility for something, and so on (for an excellent up-to-date overview see Wiggins 2017). DP relies on the close attention to interactional detail which is a hallmark of traditional Conversation Analysis, though transcripts are produced more for the benefit of clarity in showing topical patterns as well as sequential ones. Thus not only is the content—the words—of what one says captured, but also the conversational environment in which it is occasioned. In practice, this means attending to paralinguistic features such as laughter, prosody, hesitations and so forth. Such crucial interactional features are not always present within psychological and sociological studies of conversations (e.g. in interviews with participants), thus leaving out potential contributing factors to the responses which have been elicited.

DP work is qualitative work, and like most forms of discourse analysis there is a heavy reliance on very close appraisals of relatively few texts. Given the manual restrictions and time-intensive nature of such investigations, it is inevitable that one ends up working with much smaller data sets than in other forms of analysis. Potter and Wetherell note that for DP work ‘the success of a study is *not* in the least dependent on sample size. It is *not* the case that a larger sample necessarily indicates a more painstaking or worthwhile piece of research. Indeed, more interviews can often simply add to the labour involved without adding anything to the analysis’ (1987: 161). Such saturation of the text population is therefore both nearly impossible and could even be argued as being inappropriate (O’Reilly and Parker 2013).

DP has three core tenets which underpin the way in which such research is conducted. The first is that language is ‘both constructed and constructive’ (Wiggins 2017: 9) of our shared reality. In this, it follows

the social constructionist paradigm of treating what we know as being historical and cultural ‘constructs’, so that the English words for ‘sadness’ or ‘anger’ or ‘loneliness’ may not have exact equivalents at different points in time, or that they may not translate seamlessly into other contemporary languages. Whilst the underlying physiological processes have an empirically observable basis, the ways in which we make talk about those processes implicate us in our constructed understanding of them. This is what is meant by the term ‘constructed’ and ‘constructive’: language both contributes to our understanding of the world around us and simultaneously reflects the shared assumptions in that world. The second tenet is that language is grounded within discourse between individuals, rather than within the mind. In this, DP departs from other theories of language which treat what we say as evidence about internal mechanisms for understanding and communicating. Discourse here is construed as occurring simultaneously within an interactional context (e.g. talking to friends, taking part in a research interview), a rhetorical framework against which we discount alternate versions of reality, and a sequence of interaction based on conversational turns (Wiggins 2017: 12).

The third and final tenet comprises the performative nature of talk. In other words, whenever we speak we are getting something done. At an abstract level, this means that when we speak we are contributing to the shared reality we are implicated in, but on a more mundane level it means speakers are *constantly* orienting themselves to implicit conversational objectives over the course of an interaction. Such objectives may comprise accounting for actions, mitigating blame, showing affiliation, soliciting support, eliciting a response, deferring responsibility and so on. Even within interactional contexts that are fundamentally the same across many different cultures (e.g. doctor–patient interviews) there will be adjustments to such objectives in order to attend not only to cultural specifics, but also to manage the changing ‘environment’ of the interaction. The results of these tenets are DP analyses capable of tracking the ebb and flow of the speakers’ discursive objectives, so that conversations are shown for the dynamic and unfolding phenomena they are rather than the more static view of treating their words as a gateway into the mind.

## Discursive Psychology and Emotion

One of the main branches of inquiry to emerge from DP concerns the investigation of emotion talk in everyday contexts. As Edwards (1999: 273) notes, ‘a major theme of discursive psychology is the rhetorical design and use of emotion categories’. To this end, he outlines a series of ten rhetorical contrasts which comprise a blueprint for investigating the social functions of emotion talk. I include these below (ibid.: 282–283), with a brief gloss of my own for each of them, relating them to the student interviews on loneliness:

1. *Emotion vs. cognition*

Is loneliness presented as an underlying emotion, or as a cognitive perception of one’s social interactions?

2. *Irrational vs. rational*

Is loneliness talked about as something which is justified within the context?

3. *Cognitively grounded and/or cognitively consequential*

Do students present subsequent thoughts on the basis of an assumed underlying feeling of loneliness?

4. *Event-driven vs. dispositional*

Is the loneliness presented as derived from external stimuli, or from an internal predisposition to be lonely?

5. *Dispositions vs. temporary states*

Is loneliness described as being restricted to brief periods of time, or is it an ongoing issue?

6. *Emotional behaviour as controllable action or passive action*

Is loneliness constructed as something which one has control over?

7. *Spontaneous vs. externally caused*

Do the speakers assign responsibility for their loneliness to external factors (e.g. university halls) or to internal dispositions (e.g. introversion)?

8. *Natural vs. moral*

Is one’s loneliness presented as an automatic consequence of experiences, or as a moral judgement on those experiences? (e.g. ‘I’m lonely because I don’t socialize’).

9. *Internal states vs. external behaviour: Private ('feelings') vs public ('expressions', 'displays')*

Is loneliness something the students say they privately experience, or something that they publicly express?

10. *Honest (spontaneous, reactive) vs. fake*

Are disclosures of loneliness worked up as sincere or not?

Edwards notes that this is not an exhaustive list, and that the contrasts are not mutually exclusive. They form the central basis of emotion identity work, whereby inferences are managed using one or more of these concerns. As we shall see over the course of this book, some of these rhetorical contrasts play a frequent and important role in how students make sense of loneliness within the interviews, and others considerably less so. For those who experience it, it is a topic which may carry a significant social stigma, and thus one which has to be broached and handled delicately in conversation.

Identity work around emotions is usually very complex, with feelings and actions being invoked to index membership of a given category (Stokoe 2012). The term 'identity' is a very slippery one to define, though in DP it is 'understood as the way in which a person is characterised in a particular way, in a particular context, and for a particular purpose in speech or writing' (Wiggins 2017: 202). Identities only exist in the performing of them, and as such there cannot be said to be an underlying basic version of oneself waiting to be teased out in a research interview. Such performances are contextually bound and depend on a range of factors such as the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, the environment in which the interaction is taking place, the role the participants know they are adopting (e.g. information-giver), and the overall purpose of the exchange. There may also be further considerations. As Widdicombe (2017: 461) points out:

There are also examples of occasions on which, when asked directly about their identities, speakers do not orient to their practical or functional significance; instead, they reject, resist or deny category membership, even when there are locally occasioned grounds for assuming its relevance.

This reminds us of the importance of treating interactions as unfolding in time, where speakers may choose to orient themselves to or from a given category depending on what is happening in each moment of the interview. It would be foolish to treat a *single* disclosure of loneliness as evidence that a speaker should therefore be categorically labelled as 'lonely'. From a DP perspective, it is important to track orientations to such categories over the course of the exchange, and in doing so may it help to resolve issues where speakers seemingly contradict themselves at different points in time (more on this in Chapter 5). In research interviews, identity is a 'researcher's topic rather than a participant's tool or resource' (Widdicombe 2017: 475) and so we should pay close attention to how participants negotiate usage of this prospective membership of an identity.

A final point worthy of noting here concerns the co-constructed nature of discursive actions, which for this study comprises disclosures of loneliness. There has been a renewed focus in past years on interviews as sites of collaborative identity work (e.g. Widdicombe 2015; Mann 2010), where an interviewee's responses cannot be extracted and quoted in isolation from the interactive environment which they originally inhabited (Talmy 2010). The way in which a question is worded, the phraseology deployed, and the tone of the delivery may all impact on the kind of response that is elicited, so that even if the same question is put to different participants, the differential delivery of it needs to be accounted for as a variable. Rightly there has been much criticism of transcripts which record only the interviewee's words, and even worse, of missing the interviewer's words out entirely (e.g. Potter and Hepburn 2005). Therefore, for DP work to be successful it is imperative that sufficient context is provided in the transcripts, and that the answers *and* questions are located within the broader sequence of the interview itself. As a result, the extracts provided within each chapter will highlight the place in which they occurred within the questioning sequence, and the topics which have been brought to bear shortly before those extracts begin. As will be shown later, this will be crucial for differentiating disclosures which have been progressively worked up and alluded to over the course of seemingly unconnected topics, and those disclosures which occur only as a result of direct prompting from the interviewer. This ultimately shapes the kinds of inferences one is able to draw from the responses provided.

## Defining 'Loneliness' in Discursive Psychological Terms

Discursive Psychology fundamentally challenges the utility of dominant research methods used for studying emotions in mainstream psychology. Experiments, and especially questionnaire-based studies, are particularly prevalent in research on loneliness (e.g. Vasileiou et al. 2019; Qualter et al. 2013; Cacioppo et al. 2010). Such studies operate on a number of implicit assumptions in their research designs, which previous DP research has shown to be problematic (e.g. Wiggins et al. 2001: 6). Wiggins et al. demonstrate, for example, how the psychological literature on *eating practices* often overlooks the fact that 'eating is not simply an abstract, individual activity, but is folded into social interaction and daily routine' (ibid.: 13). The present study draws many parallels with this, whereby physiological experiences are best studied as the product of social interaction and meaning-making practices, instead of being quantified based on limited isolated reflections. For mainstream psychological research on loneliness which uses questionnaires and scales like the UCLA Scale of Loneliness, the assumptions this study challenges may be summarized as follows:

- Feelings of loneliness can be quantified and measured (e.g. over time);
- Measurements reflect participants' internal experiences of loneliness;
- Participants' responses are indicative of tangible loneliness experiences;
- Participants have a fixed evaluation of their loneliness, which can be elicited through research.

One of the main goals of this book is to show an alternative approach to the study of loneliness, one not based on the above assumptions. I argue that individuals' conceptualizations of their loneliness experiences are mediated through the specific social interaction in which such experiences are being elicited. Based on this, the assumptions underlying *this* study are as follows:

- Feelings of loneliness cannot readily be reduced to a number and quantified;
- Individuals' loneliness experiences are tied up with their attempts to make sense of them within social interactions;
- What individuals *say* about their loneliness experiences do not necessarily match reality;
- Individuals do not necessarily have a static understanding of their lonely feelings, ready to be teased out by research instruments like questionnaires.

These four new assumptions capture the essence of a Discursive Psychological approach to understanding the deployment of emotions in interaction. It highlights the fluidity of the ways in which people adopt retellings of an experience for the purposes of orienting themselves to different social situations or interlocutors. It does not take for granted a monolithic underlying 'reality' with which people can draw upon with perfect recall and veracity.

## Social Science Research Interviews

The place of social science research interviews within the project of DP is not an assured one, and so it is worth spending a little time outlining the spirited debate that has been had over the validity of such research instruments. There has been some extended criticism of the use of interviews by some scholars, resulting in a call for analysts to move away from their use (e.g. Potter and Hepburn 2005). One of the recurring critiques of previous research which has utilized semi-structured interview data is that the results are prone to be invalidated because of the apparently artificial nature of the interaction. The argument is that research interviews (as opposed to news interviews, or job interviews) would fail what has been referred to as the 'dead researcher test' (Potter 2002), whereby the language produced would not have occurred had that researcher not been present to instigate and record it. The point is also made that interviewees are often primed to be as helpful as possible to what they perceive to be the purpose of the study

(see Talmy 2010). All of these issues point to the apparent problem with research interview data: they are seemingly not natural, and the interlocutors are engaged in a guessing game as to what they think will help the study. Another issue to consider include whether interviews are problematic to analyse because of a lack of topic continuity between questions, and the fact that interviewers retain the ability to change the focus at any time (Myers and Lampropoulou 2013: 339).

However, as Goodman and Speer (2016: 60) argue, researchers must be wary of attributing an 'either/or' mentality to the categorization of data as 'natural' or 'unnatural'. Rather they argue for a nuanced continuum whereby data and methods are evaluated on the basis of their ability to answer research questions, something they term 'procedural consequentiality' (ibid.: 64; see also Rapley 2016 in the same edited volume). They thus move the criteria for success away from a cline of naturalness and towards a cline of effectiveness. Indeed, the act of approaching participants in 'natural' settings, gaining consent to record, and then debriefing them afterwards must by necessity influence the interactions which are then subsequently produced. As Goffman noted in his dramaturgical interpretation of everyday human interaction, speakers in 'natural' settings may still 'perform' for audiences who are not immediately visible, which comprises the researcher who is physically absent during the recorded talk.

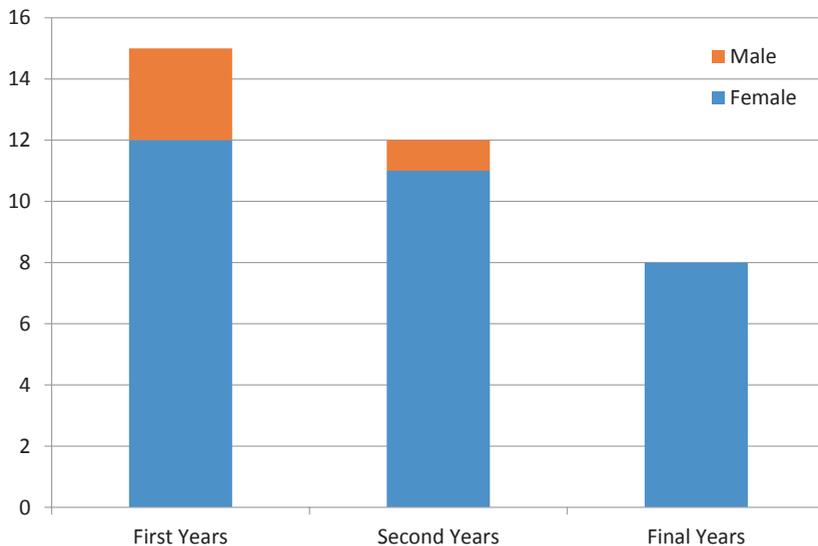
Semi-structured research interviews are therefore valid so long as they are treated as the object of investigation themselves, rather than construed as a window into what people 'really' think or say about a given topic. This gets around the false issue of determining whether or not participants are telling us 'the truth' in interviews. Examples of previous DP-related work which has used such interviews include Widdicombe's study on Syrian national identities (2017), Wiggins and colleagues' study on how people with alopecia managed talk of their wig use around the issue of social accountability (Wiggins et al. 2014), and Kirkwood et al. (2013) on identity management of asylum seekers in the UK. All of these studies take as their point of departure a focus on the management of the interview, and the impressions participants work to convey of themselves.

## The Study

The data set comprises 35 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students studying for a humanities degree at two different UK universities. Ethical approval was obtained by the researcher's institution, and the participants were recruited via convenience sampling on the basis of taking part in a study of 'feelings and emotions at university'. The call was restricted to full-time undergraduate students, thus discounting other demographics such as postgraduate students, distance learners and part-time students. This decision was taken in order to restrict some of the many variables (e.g. life experience, whether they have a family to support, formal contact hours on their degree, etc.), and so that the experiences the students would be reflecting on would largely be the same.

One additional interview was conducted, but then later discounted, as the undergraduate student involved comprised the only mature student in the data set. The interviews were conducted in a small room on both university campuses in term time and lasted between 17 minutes and 55 minutes, with an overall average of 19 minutes and a total of just over 12 hours' worth of interview material. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed focusing on the words and some basic interactional features. All of the question and answer segments pertaining to loneliness were then isolated for more in-depth transcription using traditional Jefferson notations (Jefferson 2004). All transcripts were produced by the interviewer. The students were aged between 18 and 24 and comprised the following demographics (Fig. 1.2).

As we can see from the graph, there is a strong female bias in the group of self-selecting participants (only 4 out of the 35 were male). Students were aware that the purpose of the interview was to investigate identities around feelings and emotions whilst at university, though they were only debriefed afterwards as to the specific focus on loneliness. Questions were asked on a wide variety of positive (e.g. happiness, excitement) and negative (e.g. anxiety, loneliness) feelings and emotions which the students had experienced in their time at university



**Fig. 1.2** Breakdown of the student participants

to date, in an attempt to elicit less reflexively self-aware responses and to mitigate conversational bias towards the topic under investigation. Whilst the same set list of questions was used for each semi-structured interview, I adapted the ordering as necessary in order to maintain the topical flow of conversation established by the student. Sometimes students broached the topic of loneliness in advance of my asking about it, and at other times, they discussed it in response to direct prompts and questions from the interviewer. Thus, I make a distinction between disclosures of loneliness which are unprompted or prompted. Unprompted disclosures are the result of no direct prompt or question by the interviewer, though as we shall see later, this does not mean the disclosures were produced ‘at random’ or outside of the expectations of conversational relevance. Prompted disclosures, by contrast, are the result of an explicit and direct question by the interviewer.

The purpose of the research interviews is to observe what kinds of loneliness talk are engaged in by the students with the interviewer, what inferential concerns they orient themselves to, and what kinds of

discursive actions they perform when disclosing experiences of loneliness. The central paradox of researching identities (in this case, around loneliness) is encapsulated very well by Widdicombe's study on Syrian identities, where she states that 'asking direct questions about category membership is used to generate talk about the topic of identity that would be difficult to collect otherwise, but this may in turn provide for a reluctance to self-identify, thus making identity a delicate business' (Widdicombe 2017: 460). The situation is complicated still further when the topic under investigation is one which has attracted a degree of social stigma, so that explicitly formulating oneself as lonely comes with a potentially large social and interactional cost. The intention, then, was to allow the students to define and talk about loneliness on their own terms (see Chapter 2 on disclosures), and to how they went about the business of disclosing or denying having felt lonely at university. As Wooffitt (2005: 79) points out, the purpose of such DP analyses is 'to study the ways in which accounts are constructed flexibly and used functionally'. In other words, how do the students organize their accounts of loneliness experiences, and for what purposes do they do this?

## Overview of the Book

The main focus of this book will be on presenting several themed Discursive Psychological analyses of the student interview data on loneliness. I am interested in how students organize their conversational behaviour around disclosures of loneliness, and what this might tell us about how an otherwise 'hidden' emotion is treated when made public. As we have seen, loneliness is an increasingly reported on problem both within the higher education sector, and in the national press. It is an issue which does not seem likely to vanish any time soon, and so we are obliged to investigate in order to provide insights into how this can be alleviated. It is one of the central arguments of this book that the language we use to talk about negative feelings, like loneliness, is instrumental in understanding the problem. A DP approach can hold a mirror up to interactions to show speakers reflexively organize themselves not only in relation to a given topic, but also to each other.

Such close attention to inference-making practices can make visible some of the potentially damaging ways in which we talk about loneliness.

In Chapter 2, I begin looking at how disclosures of loneliness are occasioned within the student interviews. Given that disclosures are often personal, and that the topic is a delicate one, it is helpful to see how this topic enters into the discussion between interviewer and interviewee. I make a distinction between prompted and unprompted disclosures and show how these influence how much information is offered and how ultimately it is delivered. I also highlight an intriguing pattern whereby some of the students seemingly contradict themselves, by disclosing loneliness and then later denying it. By applying a DP analysis, I show to resolve such a conundrum.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the first of the three major themes in the data, that of constraint. I examine how students invoke things they cannot do as a way of deflecting responsibility for their feelings of loneliness. I slightly modify Sealey's (2012) terminology as a template for distinguishing personal, structural and cultural constraints, to show how students orient themselves to different kinds of constraint factors in their lives at university. Many topics are offered up as factors, from one's predispositions, university accommodation, money, social norms and more. This shows how diversely students account for feelings of loneliness, and how they formulate constraints as a way of implying frustrated sociability.

In Chapter 4, I address how students invoke social credentials as a way of mitigating the force and/or seriousness of their loneliness disclosures. This pattern is a very interesting one in that the interviewees orient themselves almost immediately to the minimization of a category they have only just ascribed to. I show how there are two main types of credential, the first of which is social dispositions. These are designed to convey the speaker as a sociable individual, and by implication someone who does not ordinarily experience feelings of loneliness. The second comprises social networks, where the number or quality of one's friendships is deployed as proof of an otherwise sociable identity. I unpack how both of these credentials are incorporated into student's accounting practices, and what this can tell us about the rhetorical work that goes into disclosing loneliness.

Chapter 5 will show the theme of Temporal Contrasts. Here the students narrate themselves at different periods in time in order to show an example of them when they were not lonely. Conversely, we will also see reverse examples of this, whereby loneliness for them is located within a past self in order to imply that it is not so in the present. I talk through several discursive devices related to the social construction of time, and how students incorporate these into their disclosure work in order to attend to impression management.

Finally in Chapter 6, I summarize the main themes of the book before making the case for the utility of Discursive Psychology in the study of loneliness. I offer several thoughts on the strengths of such an approach in relation to what has come previously, and what potential implications these could have for universities, before suggesting future lines of enquiry in the study of loneliness.

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# 2

## Disclosures of Loneliness

### Introduction

This chapter comprises an investigation into the ways students make their loneliness heard within the research interviews. This may be achieved implicitly by alluding to one's feelings or more explicitly through the use of direct self-disclosures. A self-disclosure may be defined as 'a process between individuals in which selves are shared, shaped, negotiated and altered' (Hargie 2016: 268). Previous research has concluded that lonely individuals are significantly less likely to disclose their feelings and emotions compared with their peers (Schwab et al. 1998), something which presents a significant challenge for scholars of loneliness. The chapter intends to identify the discursive patterns which appear in students' self-disclosures and to comment on the interactional concerns which coincide with them. Whilst I do not claim to generalize the results beyond the situated environment of the research interview, I do emphasize the utility of analysing how individuals formulate loneliness when they are given a safe conversational space to do so. There are likely to be significant overlaps in how loneliness is also

talked up in more naturalistic settings, though this is a matter for future scholarship to uncover.

A disclosure of loneliness is by its very nature an admission of absence, and one which draws attention to the possibility that one has failed in one's social interactions (Gordon 1976). It also carries with it the burden of responsibility for accounting for one's deficits, and as such it comprises a delicate topic for discussion. The purpose of this chapter therefore is to explore how the topic of loneliness is broached within research interviews investigating feelings and emotions at university. In practical terms, this means the students participated on the basis that they would be required to reflect on their personalities and internal states, and thus would consider requests to talk about feelings like loneliness as contextually appropriate. The questions on loneliness are structured so that they occur within the middle of the interview so as not to draw undue attention to them as the main topic under investigation (see Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). The interviews were semi-structured, so whilst the interviewer had an initial set of questions (see below) which he could ask the students, there remained the possibility of adapting or adding to the questions based on the responses provided. It was also anticipated that some interviewees may themselves introduce experiences of loneliness unprompted, and so the question set would be brought forward in such cases to account for this. The specific questions on loneliness which were included comprise:

1. *How would you define loneliness?*
2. *Have you ever experienced loneliness since coming to university?*
3. *What has been your loneliest point at university so far?*

These would provide the initial broaching of the topic, with the intention of eliciting topic-specific comments, narratives and reflections on loneliness. Additional questions were also put to the students based on the kinds of responses that they gave. Finally, I also provided open-ended question statements towards the beginning of each interview, in order to provide the students an opportunity to discuss whatever feelings they would like to talk about. The intention was to ask the topic-specific questions mentioned above if the students did not disclose

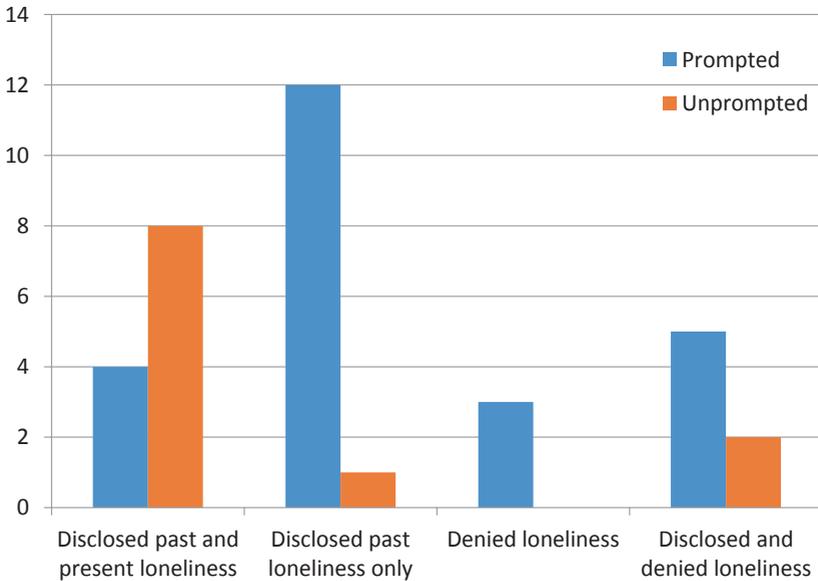
the topic of loneliness unaided. Examples of these more open-ended questions include:

- *Could you tell me about your happiest/unhappiest moment at university so far?*
- *Which emotion would you say has most characterized your time at university so far?*

Such questions provide conversational space for students to raise the topic themselves and thus allow for some comparisons to be drawn in how loneliness disclosures are occasioned in research interviews based on who prompted the disclosure. It also allows us to identify which aspects of loneliness are proffered in response, and whether these are descriptions of feelings, relationships, events in the person's past, and so on. Even though the purpose of such interviews is to prompt discussion of this subject, it is imperative that students define loneliness on their own terms so as not to 'flood' their talk with the interviewer's research agenda (Potter and Hepburn 2005: 293). This is the primary reason why the first of the compulsory questions seeks to elicit the student's definition before proceeding further.

It was found that the interviewer comprised the main source of topic-initiating comments in the interviews, with only 11 participants (31.4%) acting as the instigator, whilst the other 24 participants (68.5%) commented on it in response to the interviewer's questions. All of those individuals who introduced the matter themselves disclosed, rather than denied having, experience of it at university, whereas with the others some stated that they had not experienced loneliness or social isolation at university at all. The outcome of using such questions provided for some interesting results regarding the disclosures. Figure 2.1 outlines the different responses the students gave over the course of the interviews.

As we can observe from the graph, there were four types of responses in relation to loneliness occurring as a topic for discussion within the interviews. Firstly, 12 students disclosed experiences of loneliness that exist both in the past and are implied or explicitly stated to be existing within the present. It is interesting to see that this is the only response



**Fig. 2.1** Disclosures of loneliness among the 35 students

to have been generally unprompted by the interviewer. It would appear that students for whom loneliness forms an ongoing concern seem particularly motivated to raise the issue for discussion themselves. Secondly, where students stated that they have had lonely feelings exclusively in the past, these responses were almost unanimously prompted by the interviewer. Thirdly, a small number of students denied outright ever having experienced loneliness in their time at university so far. Fourthly, and perhaps most intriguingly of all, there were a number of students who disclosed loneliness in one portion of the interview, but then went on to deny having had such feelings in another part. For the researcher of loneliness, this presents a particular dilemma: How can we account for the conversational responses of these students, and are we to discount their responses as anomalous? I shall address these questions later on, but for now it is enough to state that Discursive Psychology may provide an answer to why some interviewees say one thing and then appear to contradict themselves later on. The rest of this chapter

is structured into four main parts. The first section will deal with prompted disclosures of loneliness, the second with unprompted disclosures, the third with denials and the fourth and final part will deal with cases of apparent contradiction by students.

## Prompted Disclosures of Loneliness

The first theme from the data discussed concerns disclosures of loneliness which are explicitly prompted by the interviewer. This is achieved by asking the set questions outlined in the previous section. Prompted disclosures may be considered the default way in which the topic of loneliness is broached in the interviews, comprising the case for 16 out of the 35 interviews. This number represents the first two ‘prompted’ bars combined from Fig. 2.1, with the other examples from the fourth column dealt with separately for now. The responses consist of information about the students which the interviewer is unlikely to have accessed otherwise. Even if multiple disclosures of loneliness occur within the same interview, I categorize only the first instance for the purposes of comparison. In other words, once the subject has been raised, this is seen as then acting as a topical precedent for any future mentions of it. Extract 2.1, is a typical example of how the topic is raised with a student. At this point in the interview, Student 16 has just been asked open-response questions about her happiest and unhappiest moments at university. The interviewer then proceeds to ask the first of the three set questions.

### Extract 2.1 Student 16 (female, second year)

Int: ok (0.4) .hh erm (0.2) I'm gona move on to  
 (0.4) a different <type> °of emotion now°=  
 S16: mhm  
 Int: =how would you define loneliness  
 S16: (1.8) °oh↓° (0.8) I think (3.0) I think  
 you can feel (0.4) loneliness even if  
 you're surrounded by people=

Int: mhm

S16: =I think that's something that I've (0.4) definitely felt (1.0) last year towards like (.) November time so it's just the feeling that you haven't really got anyone (0.4) .hh or that you're sort of a bit lost (1.2) in areas of (2.0) °your life (.) I guess°

Int: mhm

S16: you can feel lonely (1.0) just (1.0) within yourself more than like actually being physically alone and not having anyone

Int: mm

S16: (1.2) °so°

S16 responds to the question with several fairly long pauses, before detailing the circumstances under which one may feel lonely. She does not provide an outright definition, but seeks to outline the criteria against which someone may be considered lonely. She implies that for her, loneliness is not necessarily a physical phenomenon based on the material absence of companions given that 'you can feel (0.4) loneliness even if you're surrounded by people' (lines 5–6). She interprets the question about defining loneliness as a prompt for disclosing her own experiences, thus construing herself as being well-placed to define this term. She then discloses it as 'something that I've (0.4) definitely felt (1.0) last year towards like (.) November time' (lines 8–9), thus functioning as a warrant for her ability to speak about this matter, something which is known as a category entitlement (Potter 1996). Category entitlements comprise the 'kind[s] of knowledge, experiences, skills or responsibilities that the category is entitled to own' (Wiggins 2017: 172), which in this case refers to S16's experiences of being lonely as making her knowledgeable about the subject. She then reformulates it as 'the feeling that you haven't really got anyone' (lines 9–10). Her description locates the issue within the internal world of the speaker, as opposed to the external world around them.

She goes further by stating metaphorically that it comprises feeling 'lost' in one's life, meaning it is a perception of a lack of purpose or self-worth. The disclosure is tied up with the definition, and both are delivered in a halting manner with numerous pauses and a quieter pitch towards the end of line 11. There may be a correlation between the nature of a proposition and the way it is delivered, and here the admission by S16 that she feels lost in life comes with an increasing interactional cost. The disclosure opens up an opportunity for her to be questioned about the causes for such feelings, thus potentially implicating her own accountability. The matter therefore becomes a delicate one and may account for the reason for a footing shift in line 13 from mentions of the first person pronoun 'I' to the second person 'you'. This serves to generalize such experiences from just herself to many people, demonstrating the normality and expectedness of it. Towards the end of her answer, she makes explicit the discrepancy between physical absence and emotional deficit.

Student 16's response is illustrative of the ways in which speakers anticipate the intended conversational trajectory of their interlocutor. She hears the request for a definition as a prompt for self-disclosure, which she duly obliges in tandem with her attempt to define the concept. The formulation of her disclosure in reference to definitions allows her to generalize her feelings beyond her own experiences, thus restricting negative inferences about her from forming (e.g. that she is unusual in feeling this way). This also lowers her stake in her loneliness, as she is just one of many people experiencing it. The overall effect is to disclose negative feelings without the obligation to have to account for them. In the next example, the prompted disclosure comes about once the interviewer asks the third of the prepared questions. Student 3 had already implied that she was familiar with feelings of loneliness in the answer she gave to the first question, thus obviating the need to ask the second. This extract comes from approximately one-third of the way into the interview.

**Extract 2.2** Student 3 (female, first year)

Int: mm .hh a:nd >what would you say< your  
loneliest point has been since coming to  
university

S3: (1.0) probably again like when I came back from Reading Week because (.) other (0.2) all my flat had gone home:

Int: mm=

S3: =so it was just me in the flat (0.4) and I was literally jus:t (0.6) >cos I'm like< (0.4) y'know my mum wasn't there just to be like (0.4) °'how's it going'°=

Int: mm

S3: =sort of thing (.) an like (0.2) I didn't have (0.2) there wasn't anyone there (.) >so it was like< (1.0) just say it was because (0.4) cos no-one really in the flat to speak to (.) most people have gone home (.) so a lot of people were still like enjoying that (0.2) sort of (0.2) side of it (1.2) an yeah (1.0)

Having just defined loneliness in response to a previous question, there is then a brief pause in S2's response. The interviewer's question limits her to talking about one instance, though the procedure is then to ask a follow-up question depending on the type of response the student gives. Here she offers up 'Reading Week' as her example, which comprises a week of personal study with no formal classes usually occupying the central point of each teaching semester. She prefaces her disclosure with the account that 'all my flat had gone home' (line 4). The implication is that all avenues for social interaction for her were temporarily unavailable, even though this strictly may not have been the case. Though she does not mention the possibility of interactions with other peers who do not live in her student accommodation, later segments of the interview reveal the presence of friendships in other student flats. Her apparent oversight of other chances to be sociable performs useful interactional work for her, given that she does not need to account for why she did not take up such opportunities and thus be held responsible for the loneliness she discloses. Her implication of no alternatives is reinforced in the next line, where she explicitly states that 'it was just me in the flat' (line 6). Again, this reinforces the notion that

her only opportunities for avoiding being by herself reside within her halls. She upgrades the description of her aloneness from it being ‘just’ her, to it being ‘literally ju:st’ her. The first rendition draws the interviewer’s attention to the notability of her isolation, whilst the second deploys an intensifier to maximize the problematic nature of the event. It thus functions as an extreme case formulation, a term which denotes ‘words or phrases that are both semantically extreme and oriented to as extreme’ (Wiggins 2017: 154). The disclosure is thus formulated as warranted given the apparently special nature of her circumstances.

S3 then switches abruptly to talking about the absence of regular contact with her mother, whom it is implied is a person she speaks to on a frequent basis at her family home. The reported speech is offered up as an indication of the kinds of supportive conversations she is used to having with her, whereby questions like ‘“how’s it going”’ (line 8) imply that disclosure is an integral function for maintaining her well-being. After this she starts to reinforce the emptiness of the flat several more times. As an analyst, we may begin to ask ourselves at this point why all of this is necessary. After all S3 has already made and then subsequently emphasized, her point that there were temporarily no opportunities for socializing with peers. What is occurring here is not a needless repetition of states of events, however, but a persistent and carefully managed reorienting of the interviewer to the reasons for her loneliness. Having entertained the digression of not having parental support as a back-up to her isolation, she then works up the social absence again so that the interviewer is positioned in such a way that alternative explanations are not possible. Far from being needless repetition, it actually comprises delicate interactional work around the management of accountability for one’s feelings. The original interviewer’s prompt has created a situation whereby the student is encouraged to reveal potentially sensitive information which may make them seem unsociable, and so the student has deployed repetition and intensifiers to provide the obligated answer whilst keeping inferences about her accountability locked down.

## Unprompted Disclosures of Loneliness

The second theme of the data comprises disclosures of loneliness which were proffered by the students themselves. All examples in this category occurred towards the very beginning of their respective interviews, as the interviewer had not yet had an opportunity to reach the set questions outlined at the start of the chapter. Unprompted disclosures occurred exclusively in one of two ways. Firstly, some students responded to the open-ended questions by choosing to refer to loneliness. I have differentiated these from the prompted disclosures as the students were given the opportunity to respond with whatever topics they saw as appropriate. Whilst the nature of the research interview and the framing of the question made loneliness talk a candidate response, it was one that ultimately the students had the option of taking or choosing an alternative. The second type of unprompted disclosure appeared without any set up from the interviewer. In other words, such students disclosed feelings of loneliness neither in response to the interviewer's set prompting questions nor to the free response questions. The first extract below (Extract 2.3) is an example of the former, whilst the second extract (Extract 2.4) is an example of the latter.

### Extract 2.3 Student 14 (male, 1st year)

Int: a:nd (.) which emotion (0.2) and this can be any emotion .h (0.4) which emotion would you say has most characterized your time at university (0.6) so far

S14: (3.0) °erm° (8.0) probably (2.2) I would say (0.2) loneliness but not (0.6) in the sense that (1.0) I have no friends here=

Int: mm

S14: =in the sense that (0.2) being (0.6) away from: (0.4) like my home life so (0.4) er: (.) friends at home my parents a:nd (0.4) er (.) family

Int: mhm

S14: =and it's erm (2.2) it's strange being  
away from (0.2) that life that I did know  
and now (0.4) °somewhere in a° (0.2) dif-  
ferent city=

Int: mm

S14: =°different county (2.0) so:°

In this extract from the beginning of the interview, Student 14 responds to the open class question about which emotion has most characterized his time at university. The interviewer emphasizes that the student has a free choice ('this can be any emotion') to respond how he likes. It should be noted at this junction that loneliness has not featured at all so far in this interview, and so S14 has not been primed to discuss one topic over another. S14 self-selects loneliness from the available range of appropriate answers after some incredibly long pauses (line 4). As is the case for many of the students providing unprompted disclosures, there are signs of apparent interactional reluctance prefacing the act. This tends to be realized in three ways. Firstly, unprompted disclosures correlate with relatively longer pauses, hesitations, fillers and similar conversational devices. Secondly, the prosody of the disclosure is noticeably slower and quieter to the surrounding talk, serving to indicate the degree of interactional trouble it may bring for them. In some cases, it is only the moment of disclosure itself which is delivered in a markedly different way, but in others the whole discussion around the topic is affected. Thirdly and finally, there is an orientation to definitions or interpretations of what it means to be lonely. On one level, this seems intended to describe their experience in ways which are personal to them, but on another level it serves to manage what other inferences the interviewer is able to draw about them.

Student 14's disclosure has the hallmarks of all three, thus making his response prototypical for the category. I discuss this particular extract in more detail in another chapter, and so I shall restrict myself here to making one final comment. Given that such disclosures force the speaker to attend to a range of inferential concerns, some of which may present them in an unfavourable light (e.g. as unsociable), it leaves us with the issue of why they would mention such feelings at all given

the choice. It is perhaps tied to the question of why they volunteered to take part in the research interviews in the first place. Informal conversations with some of the students before and after the tape recorder was switched on reveal a range of reasons for participating. For some it was a chance to discuss and take stock of their experiences at university so far, whilst for others the interview provided a rare opportunity for them to reflect on their feelings and emotions with a relative stranger. The underlying motivation for Student 14 very much falls into the latter category, whereby he had at the point of the interview almost no opportunities to disclose the negative feelings which had characterized his time at university. Whilst the students were clearly told that the interviews were for research purposes, many of them quipped to me afterwards that the discussions had been very therapeutic for them. The opportunity for increased self-awareness thus seems an adequate price to pay for potentially sensitive disclosures in many cases. In the next extract, we now turn to a disclosure which was completely unprompted by the interviewer.

**Extract 2.4** Student 28 (female, 2nd year)

Int: mm (0.8) and how did you feel when your  
sister arrived

S28: (1.0) I felt like↑ (0.2) I didn't know  
(.) that it would help me that much (.)  
being home (0.4) but like (.) I felt (.)  
I had no-one at uni (.) I was just crying  
loads an- I couldn't stop [(0.8)] when my  
mum heard me crying on the phone and=

Int: [mm]

S28: =stuff (.) she knew it was like (.)  
serious

Int: mmm↓

S28: so then when my sister come (1.0) it was  
like (0.4) ye:ah it's needed °to allow it  
time°

At this point in the interview, Student 28 has been describing memorable moments from her first year and a half at university. Loneliness has not yet emerged as a topic for discussion, and the interviewer has not reached the point of asking either the open or closed sets of questions in order to elicit comments on feelings and emotions. Shortly before the beginning of this extract, S28 reveals a persistent sense of sadness which for the most part she is unable to account for. This is then severely compounded by the unexpected death of a close family member whilst she was away at university, and it is at this point that the interviewer asks how she felt when her sister arrived at her accommodation to take her back home for the funeral. The disclosure itself in line 3 does not explicitly mention the word 'lonely', but this is hearable in her description of the situation: 'I felt (.) I had no-one at uni'. What she is referring to here is having no-one to confide in regarding her feelings of both depression and isolation, something which is then exacerbated by the bereavement. The feeling of loneliness is talked up as occurring only when she is at university, as when she returns home she finds that it helps her (line 2) and that it was 'needed' (line 9).

Her disclosure occurs as part of a rhetorical move for talking up the emotional support she receives at home in comparison with university. The loneliness is not the main focus of this segment of the interview, and instead, it is being deployed to justify her underlying feelings of depression as warranted within the circumstances. It forms part of a sequence of negative behaviours or feelings which have been affecting her in recent months, from 'crying loads' (line 4) to feeling distracted from her academic work (not shown here, but mentioned before the extract). At this point in the interview then loneliness is deployed as a device to present her actions as reasonable within the (difficult) circumstances, and to suggest her depression is temporary and bound to the contexts of being at university and the bereavement. This rhetorical pattern is shared across several other interview examples, whereby unprompted disclosures of loneliness are deployed to manage identity work around the presence of negative feelings like depression and anxiety. In the next section, we now turn our attention to the third main theme of the chapter, where some of the students play down the prospect of having experienced loneliness at university.

## Denying Loneliness

The third major theme to emerge from the data concerns a number of students who neither discuss loneliness unprompted, nor construe themselves as being lonely at all. Given that students were not actively recruited on the basis of them having past experiences of loneliness, it was always a strong likelihood that some of the students would not disclose feelings of emotional isolation at all. Whilst the students in this category do not feature anywhere else in this book, due to their disavowal of feelings which are analysed in close detail in the other chapters, this does not mean that there are no insights to be had from investigating their denials. How one handles the denial of a category (in this case, 'lonely'), and the inferences this results in for the speaker, all provide fertile ground for oppositional identity work. In other words, we can gauge how speakers construct their identities based exactly on what characteristics and attributes they profess *not* to have (for more on this kind of analysis please see Jeffries 2010). Consider for example Extract 2.5. Having provided a definition of loneliness in response to the interviewer's first question prompt, Student 26 now reflects on whether she has experienced loneliness at university.

### Extract 2.5 Student 26 (female, second year)

- Int: and (.) would you say you've experienced loneliness since coming to university↑
- S26: erm (0.8) °<I don't think I have> (0.4) but I've (1.0) been very (.) very lucky (0.6) yeah with° my (0.2) housing as well I was put into a flat of ten people (1.0) >we didn't know each other< we're all living together shared (.) [unclear]
- Int: oh so (.) you you you clicked then
- S26: yeah we clিকে- it was very good yeah (0.2) yeah

As we can see from her response, Student 26 closes down the prospect of disclosing loneliness straight away in line 3. Whilst she does not rule

the prospect out entirely ('I don't think I have'), her following talk is oriented entirely around the proposition as having no basis in fact. It is interesting that she construes her feelings of social acceptance as being down to luck (line 4), though this is likely a means of performing modesty when positively assessing her social situation. Attributing it to luck downplays the potential inference that she is presenting herself as an especially popular or gregarious individual (and thus being immodest about doing so). She talks up the potential for circumstances to have developed differently, given that she was in a 'flat of ten people' and they all 'didn't know each other' (line 5). Here she is implying that the likelihood of so many strangers who live in the same vicinity getting on is somewhat remote. This works to confirm her previous formulation of luck being the main factor behind the absence of loneliness.

In the following turn, the interviewer proffers an affiliative reformulation of their circumstances of having 'clicked' (line 7) with each other. This comprises an idiomatic expression denoting an ability to interact easily with other people, especially those whom one is not already familiar with. S26 confirms the appropriateness of this reformulation by repeating it herself, before offering her own assessment of it as 'very good yeah'. Thus even though this interaction comprises only several moments of an interview, there is a concerted amount of interactional work taking place around the concept of loneliness. There is an oppositional implication that S26 only avoided experiences of social isolation because of luck, and that in the course of more usual events loneliness is to be expected. She talks up a situation as being unusual in its social harmony, given the number of people who have been assigned to live together. There is a second implication here that such numbers are not necessarily conducive to social interaction, especially given that none of the people mentioned knew each other and were thus inclined to form friendships. The next extract also contains a denial of loneliness, which is also supported by a variety of oppositional inferences.

**Extract 2.6** Student 12 (female, first year)

Int: .hh ok (.) so if you can now (0.6) keep those two people in mind (0.2) (so) the happiest person (0.6) and the loneliest person=

S12: mm

Int: =(1.0) where would you put yourself on a scale in between the two (0.2) are you more towards the one (.) or the other (0.2) and if so why

S12: er::m (0.8) I think I'm (1.0) more towards the (0.4) the happy person (1.2) cos I (.) I don't (.) I'm not (0.8) I wouldn't say I'm lonely (0.4) erm (0.4) or stubborn (.) °like (0.2) I get along with° people quite well and (1.6) I don't really hold grudges (0.6) things like that (.) and (0.4) erm (0.4) I'm quite an optimistic person

Shortly before this extract takes place Student 12 has been discussing a variety of people whom she has met at university so far. Interestingly, she has categorized them into what she considers their overriding qualities or features to be, and one of them includes a coursemate who she suspects as being a very lonely and introverted person. The interviewer picks up on this categorization and asks her to evaluate her own feelings in relation to two of the individuals already mentioned. Prior to this discussion of her peers, the topic of loneliness had not yet been raised, and so for S12 this is her first opportunity within the interview to reflect on such feelings in relation to herself. In line 1, the interviewer invokes feelings of happiness and loneliness as existing on polar ends of a spectrum and invites S12 to place herself somewhere on it.

She figuratively places herself towards the happier end of the scale, and the first reason she gives for this is that she does not identify with the other extreme of the continuum ('I wouldn't say I'm lonely', line 8). Her following comments are hearable as justifications for disavowing this loneliness, in that she is not 'stubborn', 'I get along with° people quite well', she does not 'hold grudges' and finally she assesses herself as 'quite an optimistic person'. All of these descriptions of herself are presented as definitions of what loneliness is *not*, thus categorically denying her membership of this category. Some of the personality traits she invokes seem to have logical connections with feelings of loneliness

(e.g. an inability to ‘get along’ with others), though many of the others are a little more obscure. For example, she does not make explicit how she has connected the trait of stubbornness to lonely feelings. We may tentatively infer from this that individuals who are not sufficiently flexible in certain (e.g. social) situations are likelier to experience breakdowns in the interactions which come with them. Another seemingly unusual connection is made with people who hold grudges. Again, the logic of this is never made fully transparent, so we are left to infer what is meant. It seems likely that she is referring to some people’s inability to forgive or forget perceived slights, so that opportunities for further social interactions are wilfully reduced, resulting in fewer and fewer encounters with peers.

Her framing of the denial thus follows the pattern of attending to impression management in her response. It is not sufficient merely to state one is not lonely, as this then places the burden of proving this assessment on the speaker. S12 does this by listing some of the qualities she considers herself to have, and some she does not. As with the previous student, she attends to the risk of appearing immodest by slightly minimizing her positive traits, as we can see she gets along with people ‘quite well’, she does not ‘really’ hold grudges in any meaningful way, and she is ‘quite an optimistic person’. From an interactional perspective, then, she successfully formulates herself as having minimal grounds for loneliness.

## Disclosing and Denying Loneliness

The fourth and final main theme in this chapter is the one which requires the most explanation. A small number of the students seemingly contradict themselves over the course of their respective interviews, whereby they explicitly disclose experiences of loneliness in response to one question, but then deny having ever felt it in response to others. A Discursive Psychological approach seeks to understand such interactional conundrums, without resorting to an essentialist argument that the speakers must be concealing their inner reality by lying in one of their answers. In order to gauge what is going on, two extracts from

the same interview will be presented for comparison. Comments will be made on the disclosure and then the denial (or whichever comes first chronologically within the interview), before a discussion is had on why there is seemingly such a discrepancy. The first pair of extracts comes from the interview with Student 7, who in the first example is responding to the first of the interviewer's prompting questions on loneliness by denying that it applies to her.

**Extract 2.7a** Student 18 (female second year)

Int: Ok (0.8) so: (0.4) the next couple of questions >I'm gona ask about< some (0.2) specific (0.4) emotions (0.2) now

S18: alright

Int: erm (.) so firstly↑ how would you define loneliness

S18: hmm (7.2) that's a tough question huh huh

Int: fyeah (.) >I'm afraid< I've got (0.2) quite a few tough questions coming up fhuh huh huh huh huh

S18: f ooh great huh huh huh (0.2) ooh I'm sorryf err: hh (3.2) °loneliness (1.6) I would say is the fear of being alone mostly (0.2) the idea of being alone (.) it's not something that you can actually feel (.) I think (0.4) because err (0.4) again (.) it's something that (0.2) it's usually consumed by your thoughts and (.) erm (0.2) your sadness°

Int: mhm

S18: °when it comes to loneliness >it's kind of like erm< (0.6) because well (0.6) I don't think I've ever felt loneliness when it came to that (0.2) at least not in university because we:ll° (0.8) I'm kind of an intuitive person sometimes because I love to read↑ (unclear) I've spent like two or three days (0.4) by

myself reading books in my home (.) without anyone

Int: mhm

S18: fwithout any connection to the hum- (0.2) other human beings£ SO::↑ (0.6) I (.) think (.) it's (.) not something (1.4) that's really: (0.2) considered an emotion to me at least↓

Int: mhm

S18: it's something that erm (.) that's erm (1.8) that you force yourself to realize that you're in the position

Int: mhm

S18: that you're lonely (0.4) you're not if you don't believe that you're lonely

Int: mm (0.4) so it's more of a (0.4) an idea than an emotion for you

S18: yeah (.) it's a state of mind

Int: ok (0.4) and would you say you've been lonely since coming to university

S18: mm::: (0.6) >not really< I've had er:::m (0.6) my fair share of fights with my friends (unclear) and my family but (1.6) I don't think I've been lonely (.) no

In the opening section, the interviewer asks S18 for her own definition of loneliness. There is an unusually long pause of over 7 seconds, after which she jokes that it is a tough question. The interviewer provides an affiliative response by sharing in the humour in lines 6–7. S18 proceeds to define loneliness as a ‘fear of being alone’ (line 9), and one which is better categorized for her as a feeling rather than as an emotion. The denial of loneliness comes several moments later in lines 16–17, whereby she states ‘I don't think I've ever felt loneliness when it came to that’. Even though her denial is presented as contingent on her definition of loneliness, she affirms her stance on this by invoking her self-assessment as ‘kind of an intuitive person’. The inference she makes here concerns an ability to understand and manage her own feelings, thus not putting her at risk of becoming socially isolated. She compounds this by

talking up a predisposition for feeling comfortable with minimal social contact for days at a time. She reveals examples of having spent several days alone reading books by herself without any adverse social or emotional consequences, and this is proffered as a further demonstration of her denial. Interestingly, she describes loneliness as a matter of perception, and that one is only lonely if one thinks of themselves as lonely. The underlying implication of this is that her own assessment of herself as not lonely therefore works to bring this state of affairs into reality. This seems to indicate that a change in perception will result in a reassessment of one's situation, something which potentially foreshadows, or at least entertains, the prospect of a disclosure later on in the interview.

The interviewer seeks to clarify S18's definition by asking whether loneliness constitutes an idea or an emotion for her, at which point she affirms that it is a state of mind.

**Extract 2.7b** (Student 18, female second year)

Int: an::d .hh (0.4) so keeping those two people (.) in mind the happiest person and (0.2) >the loneliest person< (1.2) where on a scale would you put yourself (0.8) between the two (2.0) and why

S18: er fokay (0.4) that's a tough question huh huh (0.8) cos I don't know<sup>↑</sup> (0.4) about myself usually people talk- tell me that I'm: (0.2) pretty optimistic

Int: mhm

S18: and er (.) >once in a while people show up and they're like "you're very pessimistic"< and like (.) >£I don't know what I am£< huh huh

Int: huh huh huh huh

S18: .hhhhhhh (0.2) °mmm between those two hmm::° (0.8) yeah I think I'm between those two (.) I'm actually I fee- I feel like I lean more on the erm (0.2) on the lonely side

- Int: mhm
- S18: not because I feel lonely but because I'm introverted myself
- Int: mhm
- S18: and dwell (0.4) how can I say this (0.6) when er::m (0.8) usually (0.2) in a group of people I tend to get exhausted
- Int: mm
- S18: huh huh huh (0.4) fyeah it's er (0.2) pretty badf

We see a similar situation in the next pair of examples, taken from the interview with Student 25. The first extract is analysed in more depth in another chapter, and so we shall restrict ourselves here to commenting exclusively on the manner of her disclosure. Up until this point in the interview, S25 has been reflecting on a range of positive emotions she has experienced at university, and so the interviewer then signals a switch in the questioning focus by asking her to define the concept of loneliness, as we can see below.

**Extract 2.8a** Student 25 (female second year)

- Int: so firstly (0.4) how would you define loneliness↓
- S25: er:m (0.8) I think (.) feeling like you have no-one to turn to (0.6) I think cos I'm very good at being (0.4) on my own and being in my own company (.) and I think quite a lot of people would think that as loneliness (0.6) but I think as long as you have someone to turn to and someone to talk to about your feelings=
- Int: mhm
- S25: =you won't feel lonely (1.0) you'll feel like you have that support
- Int: and would you say you::'ve (0.6) been lonely since coming to university↓

S25: er::m (1.4) in first year↓ (0.4) at one point↓ (0.6) er:m↑ (1.0) >it was a really weird situation< because (0.2) all my friends that I've met in:: halls (.) >university halls< (0.2) were into a very different sort of music (.) so they were into like RnB (.) and I was (0.4) so like (.) when we would go out they would go into the RnB room and £I would- (0.2) wouldn't wana be there£

Int: mm

S25: (1.0) erm↓ (1.0) so it was a <weird> (0.6) situation because I felt lonely (.) but I had all these people around me (0.8) but I didn't wana be:: (0.4) with them↑ (.) >sort of thing↑< er::m yeah (0.4) I think that's (.) °the loneliest I've felt°

She begins her task of defining loneliness by correlating it with one's perceptions, in this case 'feeling like you have no-one to turn to' (line 1). By implication she suggests that this feeling might not have any true basis in reality, and that the source of the problem may in fact be the way one thinks about their social relationships. In this sense, it is very similar to the previous student's conceptualization of it as a 'state of mind'. Following this she appears to lay the groundwork for deflecting a perception of herself as someone who has experienced loneliness. She talks up a disposition of being 'very good at being (0.4) on my own and being in my own company' (lines 3–4), which is hearable as a contrast to the previous comment by virtue of its sequential placement after it. S25 suggests that her ability to function by herself, and that she is not dependent on the presence of peers to enjoy herself, demonstrates her candidacy for not being classed as lonely. She does orient to other people's perceptions of this as lonely behaviour, the basis of which are mitigated by the verb 'think'. But she then makes explicit a script formulation that in the event of having someone to disclose one's feelings to then one will not feel lonely. Notice the stress placed on 'feel' in line 8,

which draws the interviewer's attention to her construction of loneliness as being perceptual in nature.

The interviewer follows this comment up with the next of the set questions, asking if she has experienced loneliness since coming to university. After some delay, she discloses that she has 'at one point'. She then proceeds to narrate the events which lead up to her feeling like she is unable to connect with her friendship group (which I discuss elsewhere). The disclosure is thus located in response to an explicit prompt about experiences which she subsequently locates within the past and therefore divests herself of having to account for her feelings in the present. The interviewer's question allows for interpretation within the past and/or the present, and here she chooses an historic experience to relate. The next extract is taken from several minutes later in her interview after she has finished narrating her past experience of feeling isolated from her friends.

**Extract 2.8b** Student 25 (female second year)

Int: and would you describe↑ yourself as a lonely person

S25: no (1.0) no (0.6) I have a lot of good support systems around me with my friends (0.6) er:m (0.8) my friends from home like (.) we're very close (1.2) so there's three girls from home that I'm very close with that I (0.4) >talk to them every day<

Int: mhm

S25: (0.6) I talk to my friends at uni (.) my best friend and a couple of others every day (.) erm (0.8) and I can always turn to my mom if I need to (0.4) it's just (.) she wouldn't be the first person I'd call huh huh huh

In response to S25's disclosure that she has felt lonely because of music on a number of occasions, the interviewer asks her if she would thus

categorize herself as a lonely person. This time her response is different, as she denies in bluntly categorical terms ('no') twice that she would not. She works up the existence of 'a lot of good support systems around me' (line 23) in order to validate her denial of the question and to attend to an inference that she may only be trying to save face. Her decision to then list all of the individuals who comprise her support network is telling of the urgent interactional need to defend her self-assessment, particularly in the light of having disclosed loneliness so extensively in her previous turns. She lists 'my friends' (i.e. her university friends), 'my friends from home', and specifically 'three girls from home that I'm very close with'. Thus not only does she formulate herself as someone who is able to form and maintain friendships, she presents herself as being particularly successful at it as evidenced by the different social circles in which she operates.

Having listed each group of friends, she then talks up the frequency with which she interacts with them. She not only talks to the 'three girls' every day, but also 'my friends at uni (.) my best friend and a couple of others every day' (lines 28–29). The repetition of the social groups and the daily nature of their interactions are held as even more proof of her sociability. There is the underlying implication here that she is predisposed to making friends and interacting frequently with them, something which does not invalidate her previous stories about feeling left out in the nightclubs. The differences between the two extracts therefore are twofold. Firstly, her responses regarding loneliness are different because the inferences within each of the interviewer's questions are different. In the first one, there is a focus on feelings and experiences, whereas in the second the focus is on an enduring disposition. S25 readily admits having felt lonely in response to the first, but resists the categorization of her as a lonely person in the second, going as far as to produce repeated evidence of her sociability to deflect this assumption.

Secondly, she construes her actions in the second extract as validating what she has previously said. Her deployment of a wide and varied social circle emphasizes her sociability in a way that is compatible with her previous narrative. Loneliness is talked of as a perception, and one which she had briefly experienced on a number of occasions when

socializing with friends. The issue is presented as a normal and logical response to a situation in which one did not feel part of the group. The fact that she was part of a group at all and had been socializing with them on many occasions even apart from the problematic nightclub visits works as evidence of her sociability. Thus what might seem like a contradiction between the responses she gives to two separate questions is in fact topically and interactionally logical way of attending to impression management around the issues of loneliness and socialness. This example highlights the importance of not considering interview responses in dichotomous terms like fact/fiction or truth/untruth, but rather as a progressive attunement of identity work in relation to inference-rich questions.

The final example that we shall discuss in this chapter concerns a unique example whereby a student both discloses and denies loneliness in the *same* turn. Unlike the previous examples which saw students adjusting their answers accordingly based on differently worded questions, here the interviewee provides a contrast within the space of a few seconds.

**Extract 2.9** Student 21 (male second year)

Int: er:m (0.2) so (0.4) we'll start with  
(0.2) how would you define (0.4) loneli-  
ness (0.4) specifically

S21: (2.0) °loneliness° (0.4.) erm (3.0) hav-  
ing nobody::: (1.6) there to talk to  
(1.0) <about> things that go on in your  
head (1.0) er:m (0.8) >for instance if I  
didn't< have my parents (.) >the way that  
they are< (0.4) ready to listen (0.4) then  
perhaps I'd feel a lot more lonely than I  
do↑ (0.2) I don't think loneliness is to  
do with (.) having nobody around you per  
se (0.4) being in your room alone

Int: mhm

S21: because you can still be (0.2) you don't  
(.) that doesn't necessarily mean that  
you're lonely=

Int: mm

S21: =it's just about having somebody to actu-  
ally go to (.) and talk to (.) erm (1.2)  
rather than those individual moments  
where you're alone

Int: yeah .hh (0.4) and would you say you've  
been lonely since coming to university

S21: (2.0) erm (5.2) physically the odd week-  
end when people have gone away (0.2) then  
you feel perhaps a bit more (1.0) alone  
(0.4) but (1.4) erm that turns into a  
positive £I supp-hh-osef cos you some-  
times need your own time

Int: mm

S21: erm (2.2) I'd say (2.0) I'd say I hav-  
en't (.) no (0.4) I've not been (.) I've  
not felt lonely because I've always had  
people (.) everywhere whether it's (0.4)  
lecturers or (0.4) other students (0.2)  
>there's always been somebody<

Int: contact of some sort

S21: yeah yeah (.) I'm never alon- I'm always  
getting emails and things (0.2) you know  
that in- that in itself makes you feel  
(0.8) part of something you're not alone  
then huh huh

The extract begins once again with the first of the topic-prompting questions. In response, Student 21 describes it as a deficit in one's opportunities for emotional disclosure, and thus as being forced to cope alone with the 'things that go on in your head' (line 4). He then discloses feelings of loneliness when he describes how supportive his parents have been with him. Indeed, if it wasn't for their unwavering support, 'then perhaps I'd feel a lot more lonely than I do↑' (lines 6–7). He thus implies the presence of at least some feelings of loneliness, and

that this would have been exacerbated even further if his parents had not been so predisposed to talk to him about his feelings. As with many of the other students, S21 construes loneliness as being more likely a mental issue rather than a physical one. He discounts the connection between such feelings and having nobody around them or being in one's university room alone, given that loneliness is not an inevitable outcome from such situations. He finally formulates the presence of social interactions as necessary for managing one's feelings, rather than a physical separation from one's friends and family.

At this point, therefore, S21 has disclosed feelings of loneliness but in a way which does not draw particular attention to them. He does this as part of his deliberations in how to define the criteria for loneliness. The interviewer then proceeds to ask a follow-up question about if he has been lonely at university, thus attempting to draw a more explicit account compared to the one which has only been implied thus far. There are several lengthy pauses (line 17) before he responds with 'physically the odd weekend when people have gone away'. Thus whilst he affirms the presence of loneliness in his life at university, it is presented as only an infrequent one. He switches pronouns to 'you' in the next line, presenting it as something that affects people generally rather than just himself. This dispositional formulation thus downplays the noteworthiness of his own experiences and thus mitigates his own perceptions of loneliness. It is at this point where S21 begins to entertain the positive aspects of one's seclusion, as he states that 'sometimes you need your own time' (lines 19–20). He implies that too much social contact in a short space of time can be counter-productive to one's mood.

In lines 22–23, he then issues his denial ('I'd say I haven't' and 'I've not felt lonely'). How then can we account for this seemingly abrupt about turn when he has only just introduced the occasional weekends where he has felt lonely? Again it is helpful to look first at the inferences contained within the question. The question is framed around having 'been' lonely, yet S21's initial reply discusses his experiences of *feeling* lonely. He thus seems to draw a semantic distinction between *being lonely* as a physical process of separation from peers and family members, and *feeling lonely* as a cognitive perception of the quality of one's social interactions. This accounts for his talk about the 'odd weekend'

when he does not have anyone to converse with, though he later downplays this as a negative issue given the benefits he construes of having time to oneself. He thus accepts and discloses that he has been physically separated from other people. It is after this apparent tangent that he orients himself back to the specific wording of the question, and we even observe him correcting his own words in lines 22–23 when he says ‘I’ve not been (.) I’ve not felt lonely because...’.

Having established the difference for the interviewer, S21 then proceeds to vouch for him not having felt lonely. He states that he is ‘never’ alone and repeats that there is ‘always’ something happening, whether it is face-to-face conversations with friends or lecturers, or email interactions with others. Even though it may not sound semantically extreme, the repetition of ‘always’ does comprise an example of an extreme case formulation given that they present the student as being in a constant state of interaction with others. His final comment ties this level of social interaction to a feeling that he is part of something larger than himself. Overall then it is important to pay attention to how respondents take up, modify, or otherwise interact with the specific wording of interviewer’s questions in such research environments (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). In the case analysed here it has been shown that this can account for the apparent contradictions in someone’s response and defend them from being mis-labelled by other less-discursively oriented types of analysis.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we have addressed the different ways in which loneliness talk has entered into the interviews. A key distinction has been made between prompted and unprompted, showing that the source of the disclosures influences the way in which loneliness is talked about and what kinds of interactional management the students end up engaging with. For unprompted disclosures, there is a greater inferential burden placed on the speakers (by themselves). This is connected to their willingness to share potentially sensitive, embarrassing or unflattering information, which places the onus on them not only to

show how it is relevant to the topic under discussion, but also to modulate unfavourable inferences that could be made about them. In other words, offering an unsolicited disclosure of loneliness forces one to explain its existence for the speaker or otherwise look socially incompetent or undesirable. A connection was also drawn between unprompted disclosures and the longer timelines of loneliness invoked in the students' narratives. It is suggested that part of the motivation for proffering unnecessarily delicate insights into one's emotions is an opportunity for deep reflection about how one feels and why one feels it.

The prompted disclosures comprised the larger set in the interview data and were occasioned by the interviewer asking a series of set questions designed to elicit talk about loneliness. Many students spoke at length about their experiences, often tying disclosures to reflections on the potential definitions of what it means to be lonely. Most of the students who were prompted to disclose loneliness did so in a very controlled or limited way, often invoking such feelings as existing within specific periods of time (e.g. Welcome Week, Reading Week), or locations (e.g. nightclubs, student halls). Many of them revealed only enough to adequately answer the question put to them, which then reduced the resulting interactional work they needed to perform in order to demonstrate one's responsibility or the veracity of one's accounts. It also served to close down the potential for other loneliness criteria to be considered, for example that they are unsociable people in addition to having had few people to talk to in Welcome Week. There are also some noticeable prosodic differences in the ways that loneliness is disclosed between prompted and unprompted responses. Unprompted responses often contain pauses which are so significantly longer (e.g. pauses of 5, 6, and even up to 8 seconds), that their appearance in non-interview contexts would likely be considered extremely awkward or possibly rude. There is a greater degree of quieter talk of whisper-like volume and also of slower speech. Whilst these features are common across all the disclosures, they are especially pronounced in the unprompted disclosures.

Denials of loneliness also occurred in some of the interviews and placed a different kind of interactional burden on the students. Unlike interviews, where loneliness was disclosed, the focus for these examples

was based around the provision of 'proof' that their denials have a grounding in reality. Seemingly it is not enough merely to state that one has not felt lonely at university, and so these statements were accompanied by a range of discursive features designed to talk up one's social credentials, be they favourable dispositions or access to a wide range of social networks. Students tended not to comment on loneliness directly, but rather intimated a host of reasons why they were poor candidates for membership of this category. For the students who completely denied having experienced such emotions, their responses to the interviewer's questions were the briefest, thus construing that this is not a topical concern for them.

Finally, the chapter outlined curious cases whereby students were prompted to talk about loneliness, which they disclosed but subsequently denied. It was shown that an essentialist way of viewing the language as truthful or untruthful was unhelpful, given that students were in fact orienting themselves to different question wordings and thus the different inferences present in those questions. In one case, loneliness is constructed as being contingent on the outcome of certain criteria (e.g. whether one 'feels' lonely), which leaves open the prospect that such criteria may change or that new ones are proffered, thus allowing for a change in status from being 'not lonely' to 'lonely'. There was also a unique case where one other student disclosed and denied loneliness in the same turn, and in response to the very same question. This was accounted for by two different orientations to the question. One response focused on the exact wording of the question regarding having 'been lonely', whilst the student then entertained his own reformulation of it as 'feeling lonely', something which was later self-corrected in the interview.

As we can see then, discussions of loneliness within a research interview setting require close attention to a number of interactional factors if we are to account for students' answers. As well as more macro-concerns about topics being hearably appropriate for the context, there are more micro-concerns about who initiates the topic, who gets to frame the definition of loneliness, what inferences are made in the wording of each turn, and how the delivery of such talk can be described in relation to the rest of the interview. Even where students state that loneliness is

not a concern for them, there are still insights to be had in terms of how they construct themselves as being immune to such feelings. Issues such as accountability, stake management, the veracity of one's statements, and membership of particular identity categories all play a role in these interviews regardless of whether loneliness is presented as a concern for the students. In the remaining chapters of this book, we will turn our attention to some of the major themes and issues raised here, beginning with the notion of constraint.

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# 3

## Accounting for Constraints

### Introduction

One feature that is common to the disclosures of loneliness concerns limitations or restrictions on what the student speakers are able to do. Constraints are often posited as causes for their experiences or feelings of loneliness. In this chapter, we now turn to the concept of constraint as a discursive resource in conversation. Specifically, we will look at how such constraints modulate one's agency or responsibility in a given situation. In her paper on constraint in oral history interviews, Sealey (2012) argues for a typological distinction between physical, structural and cultural constraints. Physical constraints comprise the tangible embodied reality of the speaker; structural constraints comprise the social structures and relationships which impact on the speaker; and, finally, cultural constraints represent the norms and expectations which speakers orient themselves to. Whilst Sealey's paper is written from a critical realist perspective, I shall adapt this framework for the purposes of a Discursive Psychological analysis, which is itself based on social constructionism.

Constraints are a widespread feature in the student interviews, where students regularly reflect on what their feelings of loneliness do not allow them to do, or how some deficit in their life is a cause of episodes of loneliness. Sealey (2012) focuses on one linguistic realization of constraints in her oral history data set, namely that of negation coupled with modality (e.g. 'I just couldn't do it'). In the student interview data, constraint is realized by a much wider array of discursive forms. It is one of the arguments of this chapter that constraint may be brought about not only by deploying certain linguistic forms, but also by bringing about particular discursive features at relevant junctures in the course of the interview. In other words, the student interviewees *make relevant* some discursive forms and membership categories as constraints during their disclosures of loneliness.

## Personal Constraints

The first set of constraints that we shall deal with here concern difficulties which the interviewees locate *within* themselves. Sealey (2012) labels these as 'Physical' constraints, as many of the interviewees in her oral history corpus reflect on the frustrations brought about by their physical limitations, such as blindness, dwarfism and inability to traverse various urban areas (e.g. mothers with pushchairs negotiating stairs in a block of flats). In my data, it would perhaps be more appropriate to render this collection as 'Personal' constraints, given that none of the students interviewed talked about the material restrictions of their bodies, but instead reflected on how aspects of their personalities sometimes act as barriers to avoiding loneliness. The superordinate term, then, is a useful one in covering both the physical and the mental restrictions which interviewees may choose to reflect on. Even within this category of personal constraint, there are three sub-types to be observed within the interviews. Each of them comprises a different disposition which is marshalled to account for experiences of loneliness. The first of these is represented by an appeal to categories of personality which may be glossed as 'workaholic', 'introvert', and then an example where the individual constructs herself oppositionally in terms of what she is not, i.e.

‘a night person’. Whilst each of them performs a similar function, they are each worked up by their respective speakers in different ways and attend to different interactional concerns.

A final point to note here is that *personal* constraints are by far the most frequent type of constraint found across the interview data, occurring in over two-thirds of the interviews which featured at least one disclosure of loneliness. Given the stated purpose of the interviews, which students understood to be about describing ‘feelings and emotions at university’, it is perhaps unsurprising that reflections on habits, tendencies, personalities and dispositions should feature so prominently. As Edwards (1999) notes, *talk* of cognitive states constitutes a powerful rhetorical resource for describing events, managing one’s accountability, and for addressing interactional concerns around identity work. As we have seen in a previous chapter, loneliness is very much a troubled identity category with a strong social stigma attached to it. Thus, any disclosure of loneliness is likely to increase the chances of remedial face-work being performed in order to ward off potential accusations of seeking pity. Below is an extract containing an account of a personal constraint given as part of a disclosure of loneliness.

## Dispositions as Constraints

### Extract 3.1 Student 8 (female, first year)

Int: a:nd (0.4) £I’m sorry to burst the happiness [bubble]£=

S8: [heh heh]

Int: =but >I’m gona ask< (0.2) what (0.4) could you describe your unhappiest moment to date (1.0)=

S8: erm↑

Int: =at university

S8: <probably> (1.2) I think (0.2) when I go home (.) and then (.) I come back erm

(0.2) that eveni- evening that I've just come back I feel quite sad because (.) well y'know you're kinda torn between (0.4) home and school and (.) erm (.) and especially (0.2) erm (0.4) sort of (0.6) I won't say there's like one (1.0) sp-specific (0.4) time↑ (.) it's just that time of day like=

Int: mm

S8: =especially on Sunday nights (0.4) erm (.) when I kinda haven't seen anyone for a couple of days (.) cos my flatmates all do things on the weekends (.) so (0.4) er (0.2) you just get really lonely (.) and you get really sad and you haven't (0.2) because I I usually keep on top of my work so I don't have a lot to do (0.4) sort of (0.2) I have Friday off so I don't have Saturday and Sunday to do my [(homework)

Int: [fyou're your own worst enemy£]

S8: fyeah (0.2) erm but£ (0.2) it means that I don't have anything to do (so I've) kind of been doing nothing all day↑ so=

Int: mm

S8: =it feels very unp- unproductive (0.2) a:nd like I go to church in the morning and that's happy and then I come back and there's (.) like (.) you've been around a lot of people and then suddenly [you're] not around a lot of people=

Int: mm

S8: =erm (0.4) so: (0.2) yeah (.) °I feel quite lonely in those moments°

This first extract comes from an early part of the interview with Student 8. At this juncture, the interviewer has just finished asking the student about her happiest moment to date at university and is now orienting the subsequent talk to focus on the unhappiest moment. In response to

the question in lines 3–4, S8 hesitates before offering up several script formulations in quick succession, each detailing her feelings of sadness at finding herself alone in university accommodation after a period of social contact. This involves returning from visiting family members (lines 7–9), and waiting for her flatmates to return after weekends away (lines 15–17). This then culminates in her saying ‘you just get really lonely (.) and you get really sad’ (lines 17–18). Here S8 has formulated loneliness as something that is a regular occurrence for her, and something which is ongoing. Linguistically the formulations here are realized by verbs with an iterative aspect (e.g. ‘you *get* really lonely’) and by event pluralizations, whereby actions are presented as habitual (e.g. ‘cos my flatmates all do things on *the weekends*’) (see Edwards 1995 for a more comprehensive list of such linguistic scripting devices, including modal verbs and *if-then* structures). As Edwards (1997: 152) notes, ‘dispositions are built from and warranted by generalized action formulations, and from norm-exceptions’, something that may be termed ‘dispositional formulations’ (Wiggins 2017: 168). She thus presents her experiences of loneliness as primarily event-driven, and as natural and accountable responses to a lack of social stimuli.

What immediately follows this segment, however, is very interesting. In the remainder of her response, S8 spends time working up a second disposition from line 19 onwards which corresponds to the opposite component of the *event-driven/dispositional* rhetorical contrast outlined by Edwards (1999). Whereas the first example treats loneliness as a natural outcome of minimal contact with peers and family, the second treats loneliness as the inevitable result of a diligent work ethic. She begins formulating a membership category of ‘good student’ in line 19 where she states that ‘I usually keep on top of my work’. This is provided as a reason for her not having anything to do (lines 24–25), then subsequently doing nothing all day (line 25), and finally feeling very unproductive (line 27). Her response implies that there are, at least seemingly for her, no alternatives to working on a weekend. This is further reinforced by her description of this time as ‘unproductive’, which recasts her weekend leisure time totally in relation to her university workload. The implication is that time not spent working is time wasted, and that the responsibility for her feelings of sadness and

loneliness is due to not having enough work to do. S8 does not seem to entertain the prospect of seeking social contact beyond her flatmates or family members in order to remedy these feelings.

In the final part of this extract, S8 switches back once again to an event-driven account of loneliness, whereby her Sunday mornings in church are followed by temporary periods of isolation until her flatmates return in the evening (lines 27–30). She then repeats a slightly downgraded version of her previous assertion of loneliness, albeit this time delivered in a volume which is audibly quieter than all of the previous turns (lines 32–33). The decrease in pitch accompanies her admission of loneliness, and also the end to her answer to the original question. This appears to signal some resignation in disclosing the feelings of loneliness.

An interesting point to note is how S8 manages accountability over the course of her response. The two structural accounts which ‘book-end’ her answer imply that her loneliness is the result of unavoidable alone time. Three groups of people are marshalled to underscore this point of geographical separation; her family lives in another part of the country, her flatmates go ‘home’ each weekend, and her interactions with fellow worshippers are seemingly limited to the place of worship itself—the church. The dispositional account which is nestled in between these others is centred around a work ethic which doubly does not permit social interaction; when she is busily working during the week she is (presumably) not socializing, and when she is not working she is ruminating on the opportunity wasted. The account manages the sensitive interactional nature of disclosing feelings of loneliness by minimizing responsibility for those feelings. Later in the same interview, S8 elaborates further on the dispositional constraints which she implies as the cause for her loneliness. This segment occurs several turns after the first extract, where the interviewer is now asking if her weekend isolation bothers her.

### **Extract 3.2** Student 8 (female, first year)

Int: does that bother you

S8: erm↑ (0.8) no::t re::ally (.) I think (.)  
it's >so I have a brother so I've always

been around people my age< (0.4) but  
 (0.4) I don't (0.2) I never like (0.2)  
lived (.) with friends before↑ (0.2) obvi-  
 ously >because I've never been to boarding  
 school or anything< (0.2) so I've kind of  
 never had that relationship (.) of: (0.4)  
 they're not really my family but I want  
 to be around them all the time [cos I'm]  
 quite (0.4) introverted=

Int: [mhm]

S8: =so I (0.4) being around people wears me  
 out (.) usually

Int: mm

S8: so it's kind of a new feeling↑ (0.2) [so]  
 that's quite=

Int: [mm]

S8: =(.) it surprises me that I feel sad (.)  
 but it doesn't really (0.2) bother me  
 (0.4) that (0.4) I'm lonely I just kind  
 of: (0.4) to be honest I expected to be a  
lot more homesick than I actually am

She begins her response to the first part of the adjacency pair by stating 'no::t re::ally' (line 1), and then proceeds once again to carefully negotiate her membership of the category 'lonely'. Her response is reminiscent of one of the participants interviewed by Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) for their study on how single women discursively perform identity work around the troubled category of singleness. Given its utility to the present discussion, and that it inadvertently touches upon the theme of potential loneliness too, I reproduce the extract in full below:

Jill: Mm, yeah, absolutely fine. I think when we spoke on the phone you didn't tend to think of yourself as single and I didn't hear you say that just then; just that you're quite happy living *on your own*.

Val: Yes. I suppose when we were talking on the phone. I, um, I think what I said was 'I think of myself firstly as financially independent'. I don't think of myself as *a loner*, as *alone* at all. I do have a boyfriend,

um, I don't think of him as a partner, probably 'cos we don't live together and our lives don't join up so much that I have to take him into account an awful lot. I've rarely not had a boyfriend actually. In fact sometimes they overlap, which can be difficult. So I've never been short of a boyfriend and always had, um, plenty of friends and two or three close friends, women friends. So 'single' sounds *awfully alone* and I don't think of myself as *being alone*, except when I come back to this house I suppose, but then again, yes, I think the first thing is financial independence.

(2003: 12–13—all emphases mine)

In their study, 'Val' works to distance herself from the category of singleness in large part due to the potential for it to mark her as someone who is 'a loner' or 'awfully alone'. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003: 13) discuss the discursive lengths this speaker goes to in order to disavow herself of the label 'single' (and 'lonely'), resulting in what they label a repertoire of personal deficit.

We can observe similar interactional footwork in S8's careful management of her membership of the 'lonely' category. She switches almost immediately to talking about her brother (lines 2–3), something which she introduces as a way of affirming her experience of living with similarly aged peers. At first glance, the mention of her brother here seems a somewhat unexpected move in response to a question on whether her isolation troubles her. She invokes her experience of living with her brother as a *category entitlement*, which Edwards and Potter (1992: 160) describe as a means of establishing 'the veracity of a particular report... [by invoking] the entitlements of the category membership of the speaker'. Here this means S8 is making relevant her previous experience as a sister, and thus someone who has lived for some time with another of approximately the same age as her. It seems to be introduced to counter the perception that living with other people would bother her, and that she would not have previous experience of loneliness. In the same way that 'Val' distanced herself earlier from the 'loner' label by invoking her financial independence, the presence of both a boyfriend (indeed, many boyfriends) and many friends, so does S8 distance herself from the 'lonely' label by invoking the fact that she has 'always been

around people of my age' (line 3). In both cases, the interviewees had previously acknowledged their respective troubled categories but then, interestingly, had worked to reject those categories as much as possible in subsequent turns.

There is an abrupt change after this point where S8 moves on to talk about her present living arrangements with friends. Negation is notably present within just a few lines of this segment, comprising the fact that she has never lived with friends (line 4), never been to boarding school (lines 5–6), and has never experienced yearning to be around such friends (lines 6–8). The three-part list strengthens and makes particularly noteworthy, her subsequent contrast between her relative lack of prolonged social contact with peers and the reality in which she now finds herself, where she 'want[s] to be around them all the time' (lines 7–8). There is an element of self-revelation to this segment, in which she now seems to countenance the prospect of wanting to live with and be around people who are not family members. Note also the particular emphasis she places on the word 'family' in line 7, which implies she has previously considered such feelings were reserved only for relatives. The overall effect of these linguistic choices, then, is to formulate her as someone who has up until now been immune to the absence of sustained social relations: they are things she has never had and thus has never missed, at least until now.

She warrants her apparent surprise by proffering an introverted identity in lines 8–9 and offers a category-tied predicate (Stokoe 2012: 281) in line 11 as evidence of this. It is interesting to observe how she offers up this category as a way of actually distancing herself from a perception of loneliness. Her comment that 'being around people wears me out (.) usually' presents her as someone for whom social contact has to be carefully managed and rationed in order to prevent exhaustion. Her disposition of being comfortable preferring her own company is now recast as a constraint in the context of her life at university, where her solitary tendencies have ill-prepared her for the emotional ties of living with peers for a prolonged period of time. She reflects on the novelty of missing co-habiting friends by offering up a cognition in line 15 ('it surprises me'), which serves to indicate that her feelings of sadness and loneliness were unexpected to her. She ends the answer to the question

by insisting that her loneliness does not bother her (lines 15–16), and then reformulates it as homesickness (line 17), which again shifts the source of the problem from herself to her circumstances.

The overall function of invoking an introverted identity, and of not foreseeing her present feelings, is to manage her accountability around the disclosure of loneliness. Instead of positing loneliness itself as a constraint, she works to present her dispositions as setting up situations which materially constrain her ability to enjoy university life and which leave her feeling lonely; being a *workaholic* means she is left with weekend spare time she doesn't know how to fill, and her *introversion* has rendered her unable to cope with the regular absences of her flatmates. The responsibility for the loneliness is thus delegated to the mismatch between her formulated dispositions and the new environment in which she now finds herself. This helps to deflect a potential accusation that she is not being proactive in preventing herself from feeling lonely, given that the feelings of loneliness are externally caused and comprise a temporary state of affairs (see Edwards 1999 for further rhetorical contrasts in emotion discourse). The membership category of 'Introvert' is one which features repeatedly across the student interview data and is signalled variably as a noun (e.g. 'I'm an introvert'), an adjective (e.g. 'I'm introverted') or, as we shall see in the next example, as a cognate noun ('I'm not a night person'). The following extract is now taken from an interaction with a different student, who at this point in the interview has already disclosed intense and prolonged feelings of loneliness, and is also not responding to a question about their loneliest point since coming to university.

**Extract 3.3** Student 5 (female, first year)

Int: ok (1.0) and what would you say (.) you personally (.) what has been your loneliest point since coming to university

S5: (1.4) erm (5.0) °I wouldn't say I had a (0.2) really lonely point↑ (1.6) erm° (2.2) maybe the first few weeks (0.2) when I didn't know anyone (1.0) so (0.4)

- I was spending (1.0) >even though it was welcome week<=
- Int: °mm°
- S5: =erm (0.8) it like (.) when you come back from all the activities during the day (.) because I'm not a night person=
- Int: mhm
- S5: =erm [(0.2) I go back home] huh huh (0.2) I go back home and=
- Int: [fI I'm not eitherf huh huh]
- S5: =erm (.) I talk to my parents for a few (.) like an hour (0.4) and then (0.2) for a few hours I'm alone and I have nothing to do (0.2) because university hasn't (0.2) started yet=
- Int: mm
- S5: =so I think that would be my loneliest point
- Int: °ok° (0.2) so particularly during that welcome week it was difficult
- S5: yeah

The turn immediately after the interviewer's question contains several unusually long pauses of 5.0 and 2.2 seconds, indicating a potential difficulty in deciding how or what to respond. The quietness of her eventual answer in line 3 ('I wouldn't say I had a (0.2) really lonely point↑') again conveys a sense of interactional trouble in answering the interviewer. It is also seemingly at odds with her statement, made several minutes earlier within the interview, that she is currently the loneliest person that she knows, though this could indicate that her feelings of loneliness are low level and persistent rather than occurring in peaks and troughs. She draws upon a script formulation in lines 8–15 about having little to do in the evenings once the events of the daytime are over, which is a feature reminiscent of S8's description of having nothing to do at the weekend. She invokes the category 'a night person' (line 9) in order to distance herself from it. This then produces an affiliative response from the interviewer, demonstrating an intuitively shared

understanding of what this category implies (i.e. introversion). This affiliation between the speakers was only possible because of a shared tacit understanding of what category-bound activities and category-tied predicates (Stokoe 2012) are likely within this category. We might infer from the category ‘night person’ that such an individual would enjoy culturally sanctioned (at least in Britain) activities such as drinking alcohol, attending bars and nightclubs, socializing into the early hours of the morning and so on. As has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2009), an analysis of the myriad categories invoked in conversation can reveal aspects of how the culture of the speakers operates. She positions herself as not a ‘night person’, which thus precludes her from taking part in social activities in the evenings. Note how the term does not distinguish any specific activities—all social events in the evening are considered to be disfavoured, even though ultimately ‘for a few hours I’m alone and I have nothing to do’ (lines 14–15). As with the previous interviewee, if no suitable university activities are going on during the day, the students seem unwilling to fill that time with alternative opportunities for social interaction. Their dispositions (a reversal of the ‘night person’; a ‘workaholic’) are ultimately offered as constraints on their ability to prevent or mitigate their feelings of loneliness, whilst simultaneously managing their accountability for those feelings.

## **Lack of Social Awareness as Constraint**

The next sub-type of personal constraint identified in the interview data concerns not an identifiable personality category such as ‘introvert’, but rather an ongoing process of missing or misinterpreting social cues when interacting with peers. The following extracts are both highly typical examples of this phenomenon where what is at stake is how the students deploy such misread social situations in situ with the interviewer, instead of whether these events truly happened in the way that they are told. The concept of social astuteness makes for an interesting and delicate interactional resource, given that speakers are potentially open to

blame if it transpires that they were aware of opportunities to socialize but chose not to act upon them. What follows then are accounts of how several social cues were occasioned, and then how the students worked up their 'missed opportunities' as a way of deflecting culpability for their resulting feelings of loneliness. The extract below comes from about two-thirds of the way through the interview with S10, where she has just been discussing the frustrations she has felt in trying to find like-minded people in her first year of university. At this point, she has spoken specifically about frustrations in finding compatible peers on her degree programme, and now at the prompting of the interviewer, she begins to reflect on other potential sources of frustration.

**Extract 3.4** Student 10 (female, first year)

Int: so the frustration seems to stem from a  
 (0.2) sort of (.) academic (.) source  
 (0.2) does the frustration come from any  
 other sources↑

S10: (1.0) erm↑ (0.2) I'm like also frus-  
 trated at myself (0.4) for like (1.4)  
 like I still don't have loads and loads  
 of friends at uni↑=

Int: mm

S10: =and (0.4) I dunno (.) I kind of recog-  
 nize opportunities to like (0.6) social-  
 ize (0.2) after they've passed↑ (0.8)=

Int: mm

S10: =°like when people will be like° (.) 'oh  
 let's go to the bar (0.4) tonight' (0.2)  
 or something .hh (0.2) and I'll be like  
 '>I'm sorry I've got rehearsal<'=

Int: mm

S10: =and then later [(I'll be like)] (.) 'why  
 (0.2) why have I=

Int: [mm in hindsight]

S10: =done this↑' huh huh (1.0) yeah

Here S10 pauses briefly before responding to the interviewer's question. She answers that she is inwardly frustrated (line 3), which is in addition to the outward frustration she previously expressed at the perceived lack of potential friendships in her university classes. There is an interesting double meaning at play with this line. On the one hand, she explicitly ascribes blame to herself for her small friendship circle. On the other hand, the fact that she describes frustration at herself allows for the impression that she is not fully in command of her own actions, and thus ultimately not wholly responsible for the outcomes of those actions. She then offers line 4, that 'I still don't have loads and loads of friends at uni<sup>↑</sup>', as the source for her self-directed frustrations. Even in this one short line, there is a tremendous amount of interactional work taking place. Firstly, she includes the temporal adverb 'still' which suggests that her present social circle at university is not as wide as she expected it to be. There is perhaps a normative expectation at work here where one is expected to make many friends during their degree programme, and she construes herself as lacking in relation to this expectation. Secondly, she upgrades the quantity in her description of 'friends at uni' to 'loads and loads' in order to minimize the perceptions that she struggles to make any friends at all. If we consider the semantics of these two variations, we can observe how this works. Had she said something like 'I still don't have *any* / *many* friends at uni', this would have allowed the impression that she is socially undesirable, even if that is not reflective of reality. The danger of this interpretation is removed entirely by deploying an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) along with it in the form of 'loads and loads'. Extreme case formulations are usually signalled by superlatives or some other linguistic structure which denotes a maximal quality to the proposition. Pomerantz gives some examples of ECFs as '*brand new*', 'he was driving *perfectly*', and 'he didn't say *a word*' (1986: 219, emphases mine). They are intended to guard against counter-propositions which could interactionally undermine one's interlocutor as unbelievable or unpersuasive. For example, an individual accused of drink-driving by the police may be defended by his co-passenger who emphasizes the perfect-ness of the driving in order to vouch for the conduct of the driver. The almost cartoonish description of '*loads and loads* of friends at uni' works in a very similar way to

this, by formulating S10 as someone who already has sufficient friendships to qualify her as normative despite not having the maximal quantity of friends mentioned.

Thirdly, and most importantly now for our discussion of personal constraints, S10 begins to formulate a sense of a poor social awareness when it comes to taking up opportunities to forge and maintain friendships. In lines 6–7, she says ‘I kind of recognize opportunities to like (0.6) socialize (0.2) after they’ve passed↑’, thereby deploying hindsight as an interactional resource for deflecting blame. The use of hindsight is interesting in that it minimizes her accountability whilst simultaneously allowing her to demonstrate a culturally normative level of social awareness, albeit sometime after the fact. Packaged in with the response is the inference that opportunities to socialize (note the plural form) abound for her, despite her seemingly being unable to make the most of them. This constitutes ‘doing being popular’ and is a further means of managing accountability for loneliness (more on this in a future chapter). She incorporates a script formulation alongside direct speech in lines 9–11, even though such speech is intended to be symbolically *representative* of what her peers have said in the past (‘or something’, line 10) rather than the actual speech of a specific individual. When responding to these social offers, S10 invokes other pre-arranged social commitments (‘I’m sorry I’ve got rehearsal’) as a reason for declining the request. In Conversation Analysis terms, this constitutes a dispreferred response and thus has the potential to cause interactional trouble.

A fourth point to note here concerns her reported talk to self towards the end of her turn, which occurs in addition to the reporting of others’ words. The explicit questioning of her own actions in lines 13–15 actually implies that she does not really have prior commitments, but rather uses it as a device *in situ* to maintain face when declining her peers’ requests. The use of the script formulations suggests that this is a regular occurrence for S10 and thus constitutes an ongoing problem for her. This subsequently poses a potential interactional problem for S10, in that she has already invoked awareness of a dispositional constraint on a number of occasions to the interviewer, without ever having resolved the issue of the friendship deficit. Indeed, this issue is never truly resolved by S10, who ends her turn with a short laugh and an

agreement with the interviewer's gloss of her reflections as 'in hindsight' (lines 16–17). The whole endeavour of deploying hindsight to talk up her lack of social awareness functions as an example of stake inoculation. Stake inoculations are discursive features which ward against any future attempt to undermine what one is saying (Potter 1996). In this case, the interviewer might well have asked S10 why she did not do anything about her perceived social deficit, which would have highlighted and implicated her own role in her feelings of loneliness. Stake inoculations such as 'I kind of recognize opportunities to like (0.6) socialize (0.2) after they've passed' (lines 8–9) close down the potential for such enquiries by suggesting that her agency in the matter is circumvented by an underlying disposition to mishandle social cues.

What is clear so far is that disclosures of social deficits at university are sites for very delicate management of interactional identity work. The *talking up* of one's own lack of social awareness is a common tactic deployed around the disclosure of loneliness in the interviews. In the next example, another student formulates the misreading of social cues as a constraint, albeit this time incorporating the notion of memory. Memory is a topic which has received a good deal of attention in Discursive Psychology, most notably in the works of Edwards and Potter (1992). As analysts, we are not concerned with the accuracy or veracity of speakers' memories, especially as there is no practical way of vouching for such things, but with the ways in which (mis)remembered events are invoked in an exchange. The next extract begins with the interviewer asking the student to relate themselves to someone who is very happy and to someone who is very lonely.

### **Extract 3.5** Student 9 (female, first year)

Int: erm (0.2) if you had to place yourself somewhere in the middle between the >happiest person you know< and the [loneliest]=

S9: [mhm]

Int: person (0.2) where on that continuum would you fall (.) and why

S9: (1.6) er:m (1.8) kind of like (.) slap bang in the middle↑ (0.2) I think↑ (0.4) .h again like it depends on the (0.4) state I'm in like sometimes it will (0.2) lean forward that way (.) and the other way=

Int: °mm°

S9: =but (0.2) most of the time in the middle (0.2) I think it's because (0.4) I'm quite focused on work (.) a lot of the time (0.6) er:m (0.6) but I'm also (.) I like to (0.4) talk to people an:d (1.2) sort of (0.2) put little things in (0.2) like (0.2) my outfits (.) that aren't (2.0) dull all the time or:=

Int: °mm°

S9: =like I just like to (0.6) yeah (0.2) I think I'm just in the middle (0.6) I like to be creative but at the same time I like to work (0.4) on (0.2) myself >and my own< °progress°

Int: mhm (0.4) .h has that ever been to your disadvantage

S9: (1.0) erm (.) the work aspect of (it) has (0.2) I worked (0.2) so much that (0.4) I'd forgotten that I need to heh be with other peoplef=

Int: huh fmmf

S9: =fso I've kind of just been in my room this whole time and I have all like these individual projects in my head (0.4) so I usually focus on them over like (0.2) going out (.) or like (0.4) talking to people in my house (0.6) which usually (0.4) yeah↓ ((conceding tone)) affects relationships (0.6) °I think°

Int: in what way

S9: (0.4) er:m a lot of the time they usually think that I don't wana (0.2) be around them which isn't the case↑ (.) it's just that I (0.2) kind of forget (0.4) [but] I need to be↑=

Int: [mm]

S9: =which is awful (.) but (0.6) yeah I prioritize (0.2) work above (1.0) social interaction sometimes so they instantly kind of go 'alright (0.2) she doesn't need to be (0.2) around me so I'll just back off' (0.4) so yeah (.) °that tends to happen quite a lot°

Int: (0.2) and what is the outcome of that do you think

S9: (1.8) ergh ((exasperated tone)) I mean th- hhh (0.2) it's not (0.4) I don't lo::se friends (0.2) because they are still there at the end of the day (0.2) but they tend to just be a little less: (3.0) willing to (0.6) °give me their time (.) cos I don't give: (0.4) them (.) mine° (0.2) I think

Here the student responds to the interviewer's question by not fully aligning with either option, and instead opting to inhabit 'slap bang in the middle' of the imaginary continuum (line 5). She proceeds to align herself along the continuum by suggesting her feelings are contingent on the moods she is experiencing at that particular moment. She then proffers that one of her dispositional features is that 'I'm quite focussed on work' (line 10) and that she likes 'to work (0.4) on (0.2) myself' (lines 16–17). In this regard, she presents herself as having a very similar work ethic to S8 whom we met in the previous section. With S9 however, the work in question comprises not only formal academic work, but also treating oneself as a project to be improved upon. It is with the latter that S9 concerns herself as she elaborates on the ways in which she attends to such 'work'. She begins to list a series of preferences and

personality traits which are conducive to being seen as sociable, for example, that she likes to ‘talk to people’ and ‘put little things in (0.2) like (0.2) my outfits (.) that aren’t (2.0) dull all the time’. The formulation of herself as a talkative, and therefore sociable, person is clear to follow, however the mention of her preference for customizing her outfits requires a little more unpacking. This statement is made hearable as a counterpoint to her strong focus on university work, and in the context of performing sociability it can be seen as yet further proof that she makes effort to socialize. The proof is subtle though, as the interviewer is left to infer that spending time on one’s appearance would be for the benefit of people other than oneself. Her assessments of the ‘little things’ she wears as not ‘dull’ seems oriented to what would be culturally identifiable as standing out for the visible consumption and appreciation of others. This point is reinforced in line 16 where she makes more explicit the fact that ‘I like to be creative’. This is relayed in immediate contrast to her preferences for working on herself and what she calls her ‘progress’. This word refers back to her previous mention of work which is hearable within the context as academic work. She presents the two aspects as competing for her time: she is torn between sartorial creativity (and by subtle implication, *shared* appreciation of her customizations) and the drive to improve the standards of her formal work. It is interesting and perhaps surprising that she chooses this focus on creativity as a proxy for sociability, given that such customizations are ultimately an individual activity and are likely to be executed by herself alone.

Immediately after this, she invokes memory, or rather the lack of it, as a reason for her feelings of social isolation. Again we see echoes of the previous student (S8) in that her diligence has been to the detriment of her social relationships. She explicitly states the cultural norm of sociability, which she invokes via the dynamic modal verb ‘need to’, indicating her awareness of its benefits. However, she formulates this necessity as something she had ‘forgotten’ to attend to. It is interesting to note that this performance of forgetting is repeated and reinforced throughout the remainder of the extract. The sequence of invoking forgetfulness plus dynamic modality ‘need to’ is repeated very closely a second time further on in line 31. The source of the forgetting is glossed as having

‘all like these individual projects in my head’ (line 24), which construes her as someone who is proactive and enthusiastically creative. Such creativity is presented as impairing her judgement about the frequency with which she needs to interact with peers, and thus is at the expense of ‘going out’ and ‘talking to people in my house’. It does not seem as if she presents the creativity itself as a form of constraint, but rather her limitations in knowing when to curb it in order to allow time for vital social interaction. In lines 26–27, she formulates an acknowledgement of the deleterious impact this is having on her relationships through the use of a falling tone which is hearable as concessionary, accompanied by an affirmation that it ‘affects relationships’.

Having conceded this, she then goes on to work up typical responses from her peers in the form of indirect thoughts and direct speech. It is unclear whether the pronoun ‘they’ in line 34 is referring exclusively to her housemates or to university peers more generally, though regardless she constructs it as problematic. Thoughts and words are ascribed to these peers which are subsequently worked up as mistaken, in part due to the semantics of the mental process verb ‘think’ (Halliday 2014) which suggests that the counter-proposition is in fact the accurate one. What seems unusual here is her explicit recognition of the kinds of responses her lack of sociability is receiving from friends, something which is apparently at odds with her formulation of routine forgetfulness when it comes to social interaction. It is unclear whether the segment of direct speech is representing the words actually spoken by a friend, or whether it is meant to be symbolic of the attitudes her peers take in response to her actions. Her level of social awareness in this response seems somewhat at odds with the routine lack of awareness she is formulating for the interviewer. There is an affect display in line 38 where she audibly exhales whilst vocalizing the particle ‘ergh’ in response to the interviewer’s question about the consequences of her actions. Affect displays are feelings and emotions made hearable within the course of an interaction (Wiggins 2017: 158). Discursive Psychology treats the observable production of emotions (e.g. laughing, crying, sobbing) as a conversational device, and one which may be oriented to in order to attend to interactional needs. This is not to say that all expressions of emotion are *intentional*, however. Indeed, speakers

sometimes laugh in spite of themselves at a socially sensitive moment, or cry involuntarily upon hearing sad news. How these involuntarily responses are then oriented to by others and the speaker themselves is a matter for further analytical investigation (see Hepburn 2004).

In S9's transcript, I have rendered her affect display as an 'exasperated tone', as it is audibly akin to a deep sigh of exasperation, which in this case is aimed at herself rather than the interviewer. She places especial emphasis on the fact that she does not lose friends as a result of her avoiding social interaction, though she subsequently concedes in a much quieter pitch that such opportunities for further interaction have gradually become less forthcoming. Her displays present her as remorseful, but even though she has now reflected several times on the implications of her actions, she does not put forth any remedial action to be taken. Ultimately, then, her prioritizing of individual creativity over social interaction has apparently constrained her ability to recognize when she needs such contact, even though she has subsequently outlined this as a repeated problem which has gradually exacerbated her interactions with peers and housemates.

### **Inability to Manage Feelings as a Constraint**

The third and final subset of personal constraints centres around students' constructions of themselves and/or others as being unable to successfully manage their feelings of loneliness. Unlike the previous two sub-types discussed (*Dispositions* as Constraint, and *Lack of Social Awareness* as Constraint), which formulated loneliness as a negative by-product of certain personality traits, in this set of examples the students focus solely on loneliness itself. In both of the examples presented here, loneliness is treated as a given, and the students orient themselves in terms of how effective they have been in coping with the feelings. The underlying implication to these examples is that the feelings are inescapable, and thus knowing how to manage good and bad days becomes essential for functioning on a daily basis. There were only a handful of these particular examples across the data set, and they were formulated by students who comprised (at least to this interviewer) the

most tangibly lonely and painfully self-aware individuals of all the students interviewed.

The following extract comes from near the beginning of the first interview with S1. The 'it' in the first line is in response to a question about how he manages his feelings of social isolation and refers back several lines in the transcript to S1's statement that he used to be 'really rubbish at being on my own'. As we can see from the transcript below, large stretches of his turn are delivered via an audibly quiet prosody, something which is in considerably stark contrast to the more animated delivery seen in previous turns, which are not shown here for the sake of brevity. The student begins by reflecting on his father's similar experiences in the days of his youth, before turning to discuss his own feelings in the present day.

### Extract 3.6 Student 1 (male first year)

S1: =°#yeah .h (0.4) I've (0.2) had conversations with my father about it quite a lot because he's spent a lot of time on his own (0.4) when he was younger (unclear) he went travelling a lot (.) around↑ [(0.4)] y'know (0.2) Europe and Asia and#°=

Int: [mm]

S1: =°#(0.6) (unclear) Australasia and that sort of places so he's yeah he's got much better at being on his own and throughout uni (0.2) .h I've spent a lot of time on my own [(0.4)]#°=

Int: [mm]

S1: =°#because (.) I haven't really got like a group of friends (0.2) I've got different friends in different places [(0.4)]#°=

Int: [mm]

S1: =°#so that means that I end up (0.2) y'know (.) being on my own quite a bit really (0.2) just going to (unclear)#°=

going anywhe:re or doing anything [(0.4)]  
 and I'm either (.) I'm=  
 Int: [mm]  
 S1: =y'know I'm not really going to places with  
 people (.) I'm meeting people (at) places  
 Int: mm  
 S1: so I sort of had to adapt a little bit  
 (0.6) and yeah  
 Int: is it something that bothers you  
 S1: er::m↑ (1.0) a little bit (0.8) I've  
 a (.) I'm yeah (0.2) I I sort of  
 expected it really (0.4) #I dunno#  
 (0.4) I'm- (3.8) it↑ hh (1.0) it  
 er >yeah it (unclear) a little bit<  
 but not (.) overly (0.2) I think I've  
 (0.2) it's good that I'm getting (0.2)  
 more (0.4) more better at it because  
 y'know (0.2) people do stuff on their  
 own (.) that's how the world works .hh  
 (0.2) and it's (0.2) important that I  
 (0.2) I learn that .hh (0.2) really  
 (0.2) °yeah° .hh

The extract begins several moments into S1's answer to the interviewer's question about managing feelings of social isolation. S1 uses this as a cue to formulate his father as being a solitary figure who has engaged in extensive travel around the world by himself. He mentions having had 'conversations' (note the plural form) about his feelings, thus implying that loneliness is something which has preoccupied him for a long period of time, and that there have been numerous examples of such conversations ('quite a lot', line 2). Even though the formulation of loneliness does not seem to be conveyed as an overtly significant matter, due to the choice of the noun 'conversations' (the semantics of which comprise a perhaps light-hearted exchange of news and information, especially in comparison with the term 'discussions') and the slightly minimized downgrading in 'quite a lot', we may infer from the previous points that this is in fact worked up and made hearable as a very serious

matter to him. S1 also mentions that his father had 'got much better at being on his own and throughout uni' (line 7), implying that for an unspecified previous period of time he was not 'good' at these things. The anecdote about his father leads straight into an admission that he has also spent 'a lot of time on my own' (line 8) and hasn't 'really got like a group of friends' (line 10). The upshot of this is that the father anecdote functions as a familial precedent and sets the groundwork for how S1 subsequently construes his own feelings of social isolation. His agency is presented as somewhat curtailed given that 'I end up (0.2) y'know (.) being on my own quite a bit really' (lines 13–14). The semantics of the phrasal verb 'end up' suggests that his numerous periods of alone time occur in spite of his own efforts. He also talks about the social interactions he does have as somehow deficient and works up an interesting distinction in lines 15–18. On the one hand, he professes to have friends, but these are friends whom he meets 'at places' rather than people whom he is 'going' to places 'with'. The choice of preposition 'at' suggests these are individuals whom he meets for a discrete period of time only, and that once the social event is over he then returns home by himself. Notice also the stress he places on the word 'going', in order to highlight that he is not part of the process of the event, but rather involved only in the end result of it. There is the underlying implication that he is only part of social events when they are staged, and that he does not participate (and is maybe excluded) in the more spontaneous social interactions which occur around such events.

Another interesting formulated constraint concerns his talking up of the presence of friends in line 10, even if they do not form a culturally normative or coherent 'group'. There is an underlying assumption here, which S1 is orienting to, that having a definable group of friends is a socially preferred state of affairs. Having established this implicit social norm, S1 spends most of the remaining turn evaluating his ability to manage his efforts at being alone. Following on from the interviewer's question as to whether his isolation bothers him in line 21, S1 minimizes his initial response before conceding that it does in fact bother him. He also works up loneliness as something which is inevitable, given that he 'sort of expected it really'. All of the previous talk

about loneliness conversations with his father, having a disparate network of friends, and not being privy to the more spontaneous elements of social interaction, is brought to bear from line 21 onwards when he reflects on having ‘had to adapt a little’. We observe a dynamic modal verb ‘had to’, which is based on the necessity of performing an action due to external circumstances (Leech 2004: 80–81), which in this case comprises the three elements he has mentioned up until this point. It is telling that he formulates *himself* as the source of the constraint here, given that he was unable to cope with feeling apart from his peers, and thus had to ‘adapt’. This point is reinforced further when he positively evaluates himself (‘it’s good’) when he is ‘getting (0.2) more (0.4) more better at it’ (line 25), indicating that he is actively working on his ability to cope with being alone. This is followed in quick succession by an idiomatic script formulation in ‘that’s how the world works’ which functions to validate his experiences of social isolation as something rational, normal and expected. It also serves to offset the potential perception of him as socially undesirable because of his relatively few interactions with peers. He redoubles the positive evaluation of his emotional self-management efforts in ‘it’s (0.2) important that I (0.2) learn that.hh (0.2) really’ (lines 27–28), construing loneliness as a fact of life and himself as someone who (problematically) did not previously realize this.

As we can observe, there is a lot of interactional business around S1’s formulation of loneliness as a fact of life, and one which he is currently unsuccessfully attempting to manage. His words are delivered very softly in an almost whisper-like manner, and there are numerous pauses and incomplete sentences throughout which indicate a degree of interactional difficulty in responding to this question. What the transcript does not fully show is that the stretches of talk either side of the loneliness discussion display a marked difference in prosody. This feature is replicated across almost every other student interview, where the occasioning of such loneliness talk (prompted or otherwise) results in periods of ‘interactional trouble’ which students deploy a range of tactics into remediate. A second example which focuses on the frustrated management of one’s loneliness comes from an extract with S28, albeit this time the reactions of other people function to constrain her handling of such feelings.

**Extract 3.7** (Student 28, female, second year)

Int: mm (0.8) a:nd (0.6) d- do you think your friends realize that you feel this way

S28: (2.0) °er:m (1.2) not really° (0.2) I think the first time I cried in front of like (.) one of my best friends (0.6) like (0.2) when I was really sad and I just couldn't hold it in=

Int: mm

S28: =>she's never seen me cry< (.) she cried more than me

Int: mm

S28: she ended up crying more than me [(.)] >£so I'm like£=

Int: [heh]

S28: =£I just can't (0.2) heh (.) talk to people£=

Int: heh

S28: =£cos they get more upset (.) and I'm like£=

Int: =£sort of haze of tears£

S28: yea:h↑ (.) >and I was like "ok I have to stop crying"< to comfort her

Int: mmm

S28: so yeah [heh heh heh]

This next extract begins approximately halfway through the interview with S28. In the preceding turns, she has disclosed a range of negative feelings; of loneliness, sadness, and grief at the bereavement of a close family member whilst she was away at university. The interviewer then asks if her friends have been aware of her feelings which she then replies in the negative. What follows immediately after this is an account of the first time in which her friends witnessed her being visibly upset. The way this account is formulated tells us a lot about how she is attempting to justify her emotionality. For example, the fact that this is presented as 'the first time' she cried in front of a best friend highlights this predisposition *not* to show emotion as a stake inoculation. This predisposition

is further affirmed in the following four lines whereby the force of her unhappiness has been upgraded to 'really sad', she 'just couldn't hold it in', and that her friend had 'never seen me cry'. The string 'I just couldn't hold it in' is very reminiscent of the constraints investigated by Sealey in her 2012 paper. The implication is that S28 had tried to 'hold it in' but was overridden on this occasion by the sheer force of her emotions. Her upset is thus worked up as spontaneous (Edwards 1999) which works to strengthen her account as rational and truthful. Finally, she deploys an extreme case formulation to assert that she has been otherwise impeccable in not allowing her emotions to show in front of her friend.

Having established to the interviewer that she is someone who routinely suppresses overt expressions of emotion in the presence of social company, S28 then describes an occasion where she did do so. Her friend's reaction is formulated as emotionally excessive, in that 'she cried more than me' (line 7). There is a particular emphasis on the comparative adverb 'more' to show that her friend's reaction is somewhat unwarranted, especially given that she flouts the usual convention of showing support during such an affect display. This formulation is immediately repeated in the next line in order to highlight and emphasize the conversational transgression, 'she ended up crying more than me'. The picture being created here by S28 is one of emotional affiliation between herself and her friend (i.e. they both cry at her feelings of loneliness and unhappiness), but also one which is indicative of a perceived lack of emotional support. Her friend's reaction is portrayed as unhelpful, excessively so, given the significance of this crying episode as the first of its kind within her presence.

On line 11, she makes light of the vignette, where she jokingly says '£I just can't (0.2) heh (.) talk to people£'. At first glance, this may seem like a throwaway comment, but in the context of talking up her emotional resilience, followed by a formulation of her being let down, she is working this incident up as a justification for withholding emotions from peers. In other words, part of her loneliness stems from being unable to share emotional 'baggage' with her close friends. Interestingly, this is generalized to everyone ('...to *people*'), even though what she has described comprises only one incident with just one friend. The friend's reaction is held as illustrative and thus acts as a warrant not

to show emotion to others in future, thus perpetuating her cycle of loneliness. Indeed, S28 seems intent on highlighting the external constraint for the benefit of the interviewer, given what she says in line 13 ('cos they get more upset') and line 15 ('>and I was like "ok I have to stop crying"< to comfort her'). The reported inner monologue contains another dynamic modal verb which orients her to the necessity of suppressing her upset for the benefit of her friend. The delivery of lines 9–17 is filled with short bursts of laughter and stretches of 'smiley voice', which may seem a little at odds with the emotional nature of the topic. However, it seems to function as a minimization device to render broachable what is a very serious topic to her (see Glenn 2003).

As we have seen, the constraints in both of these examples centre around being able to manage one's underlying sensitivity of loneliness. The first example talked about personal difficulties in coming to terms with this feeling, whilst the second dealt with a frustrated attempt to share feelings with a friend from whom she was seeking emotional support. The attempt is ultimately frustrated by her friend's own emotional response, so that the interviewee ultimately ends up having to suppress her emotions again in order to comfort the friend. Such constraints, whether they belong to the student or to another individual, seem purposed to minimize personal responsibility for such feelings. They also do not directly address the perceived causes of the loneliness, only its symptoms. The focus is instead on strategies for successfully living a lonely life and as such the existence and prevalence of loneliness is something that is seemingly taken for granted by the students.

## Structural Constraints

The examples illustrating the first type of constraint dealt with previously located the source of frustration within the behaviours of individuals, as causing a state of affairs to exist which resulted in a by-product of loneliness. By contrast, what Sealey (2012) calls structural constraints comprises the ways in which society operates and how

various resources are distributed within that society. Examples from her data set include participants not having enough money to buy essentials such as food and clothing, being unable to earn employment due to a lack of jobs in their area, and being unable to improve one's education due to the limited capacities of schools (2012: 202). In the student interview data set, there are two primary groups of structural constraints invoked:

- university living arrangements
- a lack of money to subsist on

One of the most cited causes of loneliness by the students in these interviews comprises their university living arrangements. Whether this was university-provided halls of residence or privately rented accommodation near to campus, many students reflected on the newfound difficulties of inhabiting the same living space as a wide variety of peers and of running a household. Another concerns the structure of the academic year, whereby periods of intensive studying were alternated with numerous periods of unstructured free time. This even includes periods of time before the formal onset of term time. Welcome Week (also sometimes termed 'Induction Week') is a non-teaching week in the academic calendar where new students move into their university halls of residence. It usually occurs the week prior to the beginning of formal lectures. Whilst some students do commute from home, recent figures show that the majority of UK undergraduate students choose to live on campus in their first year of study. Welcome Week is regularly construed as a constraint in the student interviews, in part because of a perceived one-size-fits-all approach to encouraging social integration. For students who do not adhere to cultural norms around campus social activity (e.g. drinking alcohol, commuting from off-campus), Welcome Week is often a site where some students' alternative preferences are made visible and indirectly problematized.

## University Living Arrangements as a Constraint

The first extract comes from S32 and comprises a typical example of halls of residence providing a sense of constraint for the student. At this point in the interview, she is reflecting on the limitations of her university accommodation in her first year of study. Her answer is in response to an earlier question about why she thinks other students experience loneliness at university, and this was itself preceded by an unprompted disclosure of loneliness.

### Extract 3.8 Student 32 (female, final year)

S32: yeah like (.) >and ha- ha- halls< (0.2)  
I think halls is a big thing (.) because  
it's so: (0.8) it's like there's so many  
people in one building

Int: mm

S32: I think that's the worst thing about  
it (.) there's so many people in your  
building=

Int: =it's a melting pot of (0.6) [experiences]

S32: [yeah and like] you're in  
this one room (0.6) I think I would pre-  
fer it if I was like (0.4) in the middle  
of a field somewhere like (0.2) on my own  
(.) rather than=

Int: mm

S32: =on my own with a group of- (0.4) with  
people (.) above and below me (0.6) [cos  
that]

Int: [why↑]

S32: (0.6) I don't know (.) like (1.0) because  
it kind of:: (1.0) the fact that you feel  
lonely (.) but there's so many people  
around you (0.2) it kinda makes you feel  
like (0.4) (that) you're going insane  
(0.2) NOT INSANE but like (0.6) >you

- shouldn't be feeling like this because there's so many people< aroun:d you↑
- Int: [mm]
- S32: [whereas] if like I was actually like on a field on my ow::n (1.0) that would be the reality that I am on my own so I'd have to (.) kinda make do with my own (0.4) company (.) but (0.4) because there are people (1.2) around me before
- Int: mm
- S32: I felt like (1.4) well why aren't I:: (.) like (0.6) making the most of (0.8) where I am (.) >kind of thing↑<
- Int: mm↑
- S32: er::m (0.4) yeah↓
- Int: so you felt like you were (0.4) missing opportunities::=
- S32: yeah
- Int: =to see (.) or meet people↑
- S32: >yea- yea -yeah< I felt like there was probably people at the uni that I would get on with (0.2) but because I lived in [name of halls] as well which was (0.4) which is like (1.0)=
- Int: =isn't that (.) out of the way↑
- S32: yeah (.) it's like a- (.) it's a bus journe- (.) it's like a 20 minute bus journey↑
- Int: mm
- S32: so that was (0.4) a bad thing as well

The beginning of the extract comprises the first point at which S32 introduces the compulsory co-habitation in university halls as a problem. She glosses it in line 1 as 'a big thing', implying that it is a problematic topic for a large number of students and not just for herself. The source of the difficulty is repeated a number of times throughout this stretch of talk: in lines 2, 5, 16, and 19, we learn that it is because there are 'so many people' inhabiting the same living space. The effect of the

repetition and the emphasis on 'so' (line 2) is to emphasize in superlative terms ('the worst thing') the severity of the perceived issue for feelings of loneliness. The interviewer interjects with an affiliative response ('it's a melting pot of experiences') which is hearable as a positive assessment of halls, which S32 briefly acknowledges before continuing to elaborate instead on one of the negative aspects of such arrangements: 'you're in this one room'. There is a footing switch ('I think' becomes 'you're in...') here where she orients herself to talk on behalf of other students, with the outcome being realized as a script formulation. It is interesting to note that she invokes only one room as being representative of the whole house/flat. Almost all university halls of residence comprise at the very least a bedroom and kitchen facilities, and in some there may be living rooms. But here she is emphasizing the only non-shared room in the accommodation (her bedroom), presumably formulating it as a place of interactional respite from the 'many people' living around her.

There is a mental preference invoked in line 9, where she says that 'I think I would prefer it if I was like (0.4) in the middle of a field somewhere'. Topically and interactionally there is a great deal to unpack here. On the surface, it could seem a little strange that someone who has disclosed loneliness is actively showing a preference for inhabiting an area with no people instead of a building which contains many. At the questioning prompt of the interviewer in line 14, she then proceeds to make explicit her reasoning that living with many people seemingly invalidates her right to feel lonely. Her talk of this is couched in modal terms: 'you *shouldn't* be feeling like this' and that at least in an empty field 'I'd *have to* (. ) kinda make do with my own (0.4) company'. As has been discussed elsewhere, modality tends to be invoked when the student interviewees orient to the cultural appropriateness of their feelings. The combination of dynamic modality and negation sets up an implication that the speaker has found themselves lacking with regard to some cultural yardstick. This acute sensitivity is made apparent in her initial cognitive description of her feelings as like 'you're going insane' (line 17), which she then reformulates in modal terms. The vision of the field is worked up by the student as a place ('reality') where there is no social obligation to make good on one's loneliness by interacting

with peers. Note the emphasis she places on the verb in ‘the reality that I am on my own’ in line 22, which implies that in her halls she could counter-intuitively feel both lonely yet never alone. As the interviewer picks up on later on in the exchange, the source of this constraint seems to centre around unrealized or missed social opportunities. It is thus the *potential* for social interaction which is formulated as making her aloneness untenable.

After invoking the field-halls contrast, she provides an inner monologue of her thinking in relation to these feelings. Ultimately, we will never know for certain whether S32 had such conversations with herself at the time, and so we must focus on what interactional work they are being deployed to achieve here. In lines 26–27, she asks rhetorically, ‘I felt like (1.4) well why aren’t I:: (.) like (0.6) making the most of (0.8) where I am’. Discourse markers such as ‘well’ have a variety of topical and sequential functions in interactions, though here it is being used to preface an insufficient answer to a question (Schiffrin 1987). In Extract 3.8, this means highlighting how her attempts to make sense of her loneliness have failed so far, simultaneously implying that she has thought about the matter before. She also makes reference to the idiom ‘making the most of’, which explicitly draws the interviewer’s attention to the social interactions potentially on offer. The semantics of this idiom suggests that the object of attention comprises a finite supply, and one which she seems unable to stop herself from squandering.

Towards the end of her overall response to the question, S32 concedes on lines 33–34 that there may be other university students with whom she could interact, but this is immediately downplayed as a feasible possibility by describing the relative isolation of her halls from the rest of the university campus. The interviewer displays an awareness that these halls are about to be problematized by asking a question about the distance between those halls and the main campus. S32 confirms this as the trajectory for her account, when she describes it as a ‘20 minute bus journey’ away, and that this was ‘a bad thing as well’ (line 40). This comprises a second structural constraint, and one which is designed to compound the original issue of living with many people in the first instance. Yet there is a seemingly incompatible tension here with both aspects of social proximity being invoked simultaneously to achieve the

same interactional purpose: on the one hand, she constructs herself as living *too far from other people*, and on the other she construes her living arrangements *among many people* as highly problematic. This can perhaps be explained by differentiating between social spaces from living spaces, whereby close proximity to recreational areas may be valued more highly than close proximity to other dwellings (which in this context would comprise individual rooms within a university house or flat). With the former, the potential for social interaction tends to be chosen given that we *decide* to go shopping, to eat at a restaurant, to drink in a bar, and so on. With the latter, the potential for social interaction in densely packed dwellings is enforced upon us, so that we may lose a sense of control over opportunities for when and with whom we interact with (Wilcox et al. 2005: 715).

Of course, many UK university halls of residence are not necessarily located on a main campus, and for some universities there is no discrete boundary that may be labelled a ‘campus’ at all. The proximity of one student to another is an issue which is for a greater part structural, in that purpose-built halls may not always be available (due to number restrictions), near to the place of learning, or even financially viable despite the provision of tuition fee loans. Other problems may exist for students, and sometimes living arrangements are invoked as a shorthand for the difficulties a student is facing at that moment. The next example also deals with a student reflecting on their university accommodation, albeit in relation to other structural concerns such as student finances.

### **Extract 3.9** Student 17 (female, second year)

Int: mhm (0.2) .hh a:nd (0.4) have you ever  
experienced loneliness since coming to  
university (0.6) this specif- (.) this  
particular university=

S17: fyeah (0.4) yeah yeah£ (0.2) when I (0.2)  
was (0.2) the first few weeks in that  
house=

Int: mm

S17: =because even though (.) °obviously (0.4)  
had (.) friends round me that I got on  
really well with° (0.2) it was getting  
used to it (.) and plus we moved in on  
the first of September so we had no work  
to do=

Int: mm

S17: =fnone of us had a lot of money (0.2) huh  
huh .hh so were kind of stuck in that  
hou:se [(.)] for about three we-huh huh-  
eks huh huh huh (0.4) and I did feel  
quitef=

Int: [mm]

=particularly strangers as well

S17: with the other three that I don't really  
know (0.2) er::m (0.4) and I think  
[friend's name] had gone to (.) [city] to  
see family=

Int: mm

S17: =and so I was a bit like (.) °'o:h↓'°  
(0.2) but I was determi- (.) even though  
I literally live (0.2) °like I say° so  
close (.) >I was like< (.) 'I'm gona stay  
(0.2) I'm gona stick it out'=

Int: mm

S17: =so I get really used to this=

Int: mhm↑

S17: =°but I did make myself feel a bit° (0.4)  
flonely in the processf=

Int: yeah

S17: =°kinda forced myself°

Here the interviewer opens with a question about whether she has experienced loneliness at her present university. The mention of 'this particular university' is a reference to her previous disclosure that she had briefly attended another university but then withdrew because of dissatisfaction with her course. She affirms that she has experienced loneliness and relates it as being specifically in relation to 'that house', a reference

to her shared privately rented second-year accommodation. She wards off a potential perception of seeming unsociable (which the interviewer may subsequently infer as a cause for her loneliness) by emphasizing the fact that she had 'friends round me' and that this is a given, signalled by the adverb 'obviously'. And not only did she have friends, they are described as ones 'that I got on really well with' (line 8), thus doubly reinforcing her claim to sociality.

S17 then moves to introduce the structural constraints having first removed all doubts about her own social credentials (more on this rhetorical move in the next chapter). She begins to frame the isolating situation in which she found herself at the beginning of the academic year. For example, she 'moved in on the first of September', which is several weeks before the beginning of formal classes at her institution. She explicitly problematizes the early moving in date given that 'we had no work to do' (lines 9–10), with a special emphasis on the negative particle to highlight its status as an issue for her. Again we see the absence of enough academic work being invoked to account for feelings of loneliness, the implication being that working on one's studies is a way to avoid the sense of social isolation. Whereas previous extracts in this chapter have shown other students formulating a workaholic disposition, thus seemingly leaving them with no means of filling available time or being so consumed by work that they misread invitations for social interaction, this extract talks about the absence of work because of term not having formally begun yet. The problem then is structural rather than personal, given that the mismatch between securing and occupying one's accommodation may take place days or even weeks before the resumption of studies. The implication she works up is that there was little reason for her and her housemates to be there. This is then compounded by the fact that 'none of us had a lot of money', which is hearable within the context as having minimal opportunities for socializing.

These issues are then stipulated by S17 as making her feel trapped, which she formulates as being 'kind of stuck in that house' (lines 12–13). Now of course, she is not *physically* confined to the boundaries of her housing. Rather she is talking up the academic and social constraints imposed on her by the time of year and her financial situation,

respectively. The duration of this hardship is stipulated as being three weeks, which is delivered prosodically with a combination of smiley voice and short bursts of laughter, potentially indicating an interactional performance of mock desperation (Glenn 2003). The friends whom she described only moments before are now contrasted with her housemates, whom she didn't 'really know'. The friends are described as being absent on this occasion, thus leaving her with limited recourse to sociality. There is a potentially difficult interactional moment appearing in the following section, where she introduces the fact that she already lives very close to her university. This presents S17 with an issue, of accounting for her loneliness when a simple remedy to the problem has been mentioned: commuting from the nearby family home. In the lines immediately after this, we can observe a concerted effort to talk up her stakes for being, and staying, in the difficult situation which she found herself in.

She makes explicit her determination to stay in her student house in line 20, and then again in line 22 when she reports her inner monologue 'I'm gona stay (0.2) I'm gona stick it out'. The semantics of this idiom suggests seeing an event through to its conclusion, which seems to refer to her ability to endure her unhappy feelings. The close proximity of these devices functions to maximize the appearance of being invested in living with peers. It is presented as a decision she did not make lightly or quickly. There is a concession about 'literally' living 'so close' (line 21) to campus anyway, which she uses to contrast with her constructed determination. The underlying implication she makes is that she does not give up when times are emotionally difficult for her, thus presenting herself in a positive light in the face of having disclosed loneliness. The reasoning behind her intentionality is made explicit in line 24, where she offers 'so I get really used to this' as a warrant for her actions.

In the final segment of the extract, she draws up a concession that her determination not to take an easy solution out of her difficult situation (i.e. by moving back home) has left her feeling lonely in the process (line 26). The argument she provides here may seem a little circular at first glance, given that she presents herself as lonely due to a range of factors which includes not having academic work to do, having very

little disposable income, and friends who are temporarily absent. But when in line 26 she states she 'did make myself' lonely, she is in fact referring to being *persistent* with her determination to staying in the student accommodation as the source of the constraint. This is reiterated in the final line of the transcript when she says "kinda forced myself", which is delivered in a relatively muted tone.

In summary, S17 proffers social structures beyond her control as a source of constraint in her ability to feel socially connected. She touches upon a lack of financial resources, something which is common to many students (though she herself does not draw this comparison), and of dealing with a mismatch in the academic calendar of being 'at' university but without having formal responsibilities to attend to. Her working up of a personal disposition of determination is secondary and contextually contingent on deflecting a potential rhetorical counter that she did not, by necessity, need to live in a student house. This disposition is then formulated as compounding the original underlying structural issues, which ultimately implicates her own role in her feelings of loneliness.

## Working Whilst Studying as a Constraint

A final subset of structural constraints identified also comprises the distribution of financial resources, albeit this time with a specific focus on employment. Most of the students who took part in the interviews were undertaking part-time employment in addition to their studies. Some of these went as far as to say it constituted a source of loneliness for them, given that social time was curbed by the necessity to work. Even though most of the students are in receipt of a maintenance loan, this may provide only limited disposable income with which to socialize. Employment may also constrain students in other ways, as in the case of the student below, who was obliged to work during the Christmas vacation in her retail job. At this point in the interview, S24 has already indirectly implied feelings of loneliness in response to a previous question, and after several intervening turns, the interviewer now explicitly asks the question about whether she has experienced such feelings at university.

**Extract 3.10** Student 24 (female, second year)

Int: erm (0.8) and would you say you've been  
(0.2) lonely since coming to university  
>you've (.) you've touched on [that a  
little bit already<

S24: [more (.) yeah I think  
(.) this year not so much (.) °I think  
[unclear]° getting more used to: (0.8)=

Int: mm

S24: = er (.) obviously being (0.4) >but it  
was mostly< (.) last year (0.6) I think  
it was just getting used- >obviously cos  
I moved away from all my< frien::ds (0.2)  
and family (1.0) then didn't know every-  
one (.) as well as I do now↑

Int: mm

S24: >so obviously I'm quite close with everyone  
now< so it feels like (0.2) don't feel as  
lonely↑

Int: mm (0.6) hh and so would you say you've  
not felt loneliness (0.6) at all this (.)  
year

S24: (1.0) I think the only tim::e (0.2) wa::s  
(0.4) over Christmas: (0.4) cos: (0.2) of  
my job (.) I was here on Christmas Day

Int: mm

S24: and so I was here alone for Christmas  
Day£ huh huh huh (0.4) THAT WAS QUITE  
LONELY (.) HUH HUH HUH HUH

In the first turn, the interviewer alludes to S24's previous implication that she has felt lonely on some otherwise undisclosed occasions. She affirms this as correct on line 3, before qualifying that this is not something she has recently experienced much of. She proffers being away from home and of moving away from all of her sixth form friends as 'obviously' (line 7) resulting in feeling lonely, and now that she has had an opportunity to familiarize herself with her university peers she 'obviously' (line 12) does

not feel as lonely. The choice of this adverb renders the whole clause as taken for granted, so that an inevitable connection is presented between one event (e.g. moving away from one's original social circle) to another (e.g. feeling lonely). Given that S24 has construed her present situation as far from lonely, despite having implied feelings of loneliness at university previously, the interviewer in lines 14–15 asks her to confirm any such feelings in her present year. The emphasis he places on 'at all this (.) year' is heard by S24 as questioning the completeness of her previous turn, and subsequently she offers one incidence of this having happened. It is formulated as the 'only tim::e' (line 16), which works to present her loneliness as an exception to the rule.

She explicitly mentions her job, and twice states that she was 'here' working on Christmas Day (lines 17 and 19). The 'here' in question refers to the job in her university city, as opposed to her home city which is in a different part of the country. The initial mention of working on Christmas Day draws only a minimal response from the interviewer, 'mm' (line 18), which is then followed by S24 mentioning it again. The ensuing laughter and over-emphasis on lines 19–20 render the vignette hearable as undesirable, and a constraint on her otherwise normal capacity to socialize with peers and family. Even though there are no overt interactional cues in the first mention of this period, there is an underlying expectation that working and being away from family on cultural holidays such as Christmas is highly undesirable. The interviewer does not seem to acknowledge the implicit undesirability (and certainly the socially constraining nature) of this, which results in S24 rendering it immediately as more visibly problematic through repetition, a change in volume, and emphasis.

Ultimately, structural constraints such as finances and references to part-time employment are deployed to talk about loneliness as temporary and event-driven (Edwards 1999), rather than as a longer-term concern affecting the students. They stand in stark contrast to the personal dispositions seen in the previous section whereby the sources of constraint seem much more difficult to change. For example, one's financial situation may be improved by entering part-time employment, but one's personality and dispositions are shaped by the type and frequency with which we have social contact, and for those experiencing loneliness this may be a difficult issue to resolve.

## Cultural Constraints

The third and final subset of constraints is less tangible than the others and comprises the social norms and expectations which govern the way in which we conduct ourselves in public. These are most often realized rhetorically via references (un)desirability, whereby a given norm provides an unspoken point of comparison. Indeed, speakers very often orient themselves to perceived discrepancies between their own actions and the behaviour which is expected of them in that context (Sealey 2012: 204). Perhaps unsurprisingly there are quite a few instances of cultural norms being invoked as constraints within the student interview data. In most cases, the norms are not explicitly stated and, instead, have to be recovered from the interactional context in which the talk is taking place. This makes this type of constraint the most elusive to identify of the three. It is possible that there is an interaction-based reason for this: given that the students spend a considerable amount of effort deflecting potential negative inferences and carefully managing their own accountability for their loneliness, it is therefore less likely that they will formulate their normative deficits so explicitly. We may formulate an hypothesis that, having spent time orienting to a sociable and socially aware identity, drawing attention to how they do not conform to social mores would be topically and sequentially counter-productive for them. Thus when such norms are introduced in the flow of the dialogue, they are rendered more implicitly.

## Social Norms as Constraints

A particularly noteworthy way in which adherence (or not) to social norms is signalled by the students is around the word 'weird' and its cognate lexical items, most of which comprise negative O-side assessments (Edwards and Potter 2017). The Oxford English Dictionary states that the word 'weird' is regularly used as an adjective denoting something as odd, unexpected or unusual in some way. It is regularly used in conjunction with disclosures of solitary behaviour, especially

where opportunities for social interaction might otherwise exist. Consider the examples below, taken from across the whole data set, which deal with social norms as constraints.

**Extract 3.11** Student 28 (female, second year)

S28: I find it's worse with boys (.) they're  
(0.2) they can't (.) go anywhere by them-  
selves [(0.4)] like they'll always=

Int: [mm↑]

S28: =hang out in the group (.) like they're  
always together (0.6) PEOPLE THOUGHT IT  
WAS WEIRD THAT I WENT TO CINEMA BY MYSELF  
(.) I really wanted to watch a film [(.)]  
but no-one else=

Int: [mm]

S28: =wanted to (.) why not ((*rhetorical tone*))

Int: mm↑

S28: (0.8) but no- (0.2) no-one would ever do  
that (0.6) or they're like ".hhhh ((*sharp  
intake of breath*)) (.) eat on your own↑  
(0.2) I'd never do that" (.) if I really  
wanted foo:d (0.2) why not ((*rhetorical  
tone*))

Int: yeah

S28: but yeah (.) so: (*unclear*)

Int: so (.) do you fee:l (0.4) conscious (0.2)  
when you go to the cinema by yourself  
(0.2) or go to (0.2) eat by yourself

S28: (1.2) >it's only because I know people  
will be like< (.) ".hhh ((*sharp intake of  
breath*)) (0.4) why you doing that" >cos  
they're all< (.) together (.) but (0.2)  
in my mind (.) I'm fine (.) I'm chilling

Int: mm (0.2) heh heh heh heh

S28: heh heh heh heh

At this point in the interview, S28 reflects on the behaviour of differently gendered social groups in her home city. She states that a group mentality is more pronounced for all-male friendship groups and accompanies this with evidence provided by several script formulations in quick succession; ‘they can’t go anywhere by themselves’ (lines 1–2), ‘they’ll always hang out in the group’ (lines 2–4), and ‘they’re always together’ (line 4). It is unlikely that such individuals would spend *every* waking moment in each other’s company, and thus the presence of such devices seems rhetorically oriented. It sets up an extreme point of comparison to her own admission in the next line that she undertook leisure time by herself. The repetition and emphasis on ‘always’ present in her description of the all-male friendship groups are hearable as a negative assessment of them. This is also signalled by the now-familiar sequence of a negative particle plus dynamic modal verb (‘they *can’t* (.) go’). It implies a perceived deficit, that such ‘boys’ seem unable to function as individuals, and thus resort to acting as a collective. The occurrence of this assessment before a description of her own social preferences is far from random, as it is designed to formulate herself favourably in comparison (Jeffries 2010). It also functions to deflect a potential perception of herself as a lonely person, given that she has just laid the rhetorical groundwork for her construal as an individual, as opposed to someone unable to operate without the need for others.

She then switches to an account of attitudes towards her past trip to the cinema by herself. It is not entirely clear in this stretch of conversation whether she is referring to one particular occasion, or whether she is talking about habitual visits to the cinema on her own. Irrespectively, the occurrence is rendered noteworthy as something which is unexpected in the eyes of her peers and, indeed, ‘weird’ (line 5). The manner in which this is recreated in the interview differs from the surrounding stretches of talk, given the increase in volume and emphasis, and also the relative absence of micro-pauses. Here she is working up such attitudes as unfair by deploying prosodic features to make it worthy of notice, and thus challenge. Her comments here align with an observation made by Sealey (2012: 203) about how speakers rhetorically orientate to cultural norms, by ‘articulat[ing] their puzzlement over unfamiliarly negative experiences’. S28’s use of indirect speech ‘people

thought' (lines 4–5) highlights the boys' assessments as unwarranted, given that they are not based in reality. Indeed when one says a person 'thought' something, the implication is that that person is mistaken.

The subsequent turns indicate her purpose is to challenge this assumption as unjust. Interestingly, despite placing particular emphasis on what others have said as mistaken, she still works to demonstrate awareness of the norms they are enforcing by providing mitigating details as to why she went to the cinema on her own. The use of the intensifier 'really' and the reference to 'no one else' wanting to go, formulate her as having especial motivation to watch a film, and it was only through the uninterest and/or unavailability of peers that she ultimately went alone. This is further underscored by the rhetorical question, 'why not?' in line 8, which is designed to present her actions as ordinary. Thus having previously valorized her ability to operate outside of a social group, she nevertheless emphasizes her attempts to conform to social norms in the first instance.

This conversational formula of attributing a quizzical comment from peers, followed by mitigating factors for flouting the cultural norm, and then a rhetorical question or assessment, is repeated once more in quick succession (line 12). In addition to going to the cinema alone, she also invokes other activities which she undertakes by herself, for example, eating (line 11) and attending social events such as parties (seen in a previous section of the interview). She continues to orient to the cultural norm of participating in recreational activities with other people by furnishing mitigating factors for her solitary activities. The interviewer picks up on this degree of reflexive identity work in lines 16–17 by asking whether she feels conscious when going out by herself. S28 then attributes her conscious awareness to the questioning retorts of others, 'it's only because...' (line 18), implying that whilst this may be a problem for them it is not one for her. Her deployment of direct speech, and the build up to it, is delivered in a relatively animated fashion, which again draws attention to what she perceives as the unfairness of their reproach. It is at this juncture that she reminds the interviewer once more that '>cos they're all<(.) together' (lines 19–20) they are unable to countenance the prospect of spending leisure time by themselves. The closure of her turn is marked by a mental state description

and a double subject-side assessment ('I'm fine (.) I'm chilling'), which on the surface seems somewhat at odds with the extensive and repeated reflexive orientations she has made towards the social judgements of her peers. Edwards and Potter (2017: 497) point out that such S-side assessments are often used to contrast with the Object-side assessments of others, and this is a feature we observe here. S-sides formulate 'the evaluation as restricted to the judgment of the speaker' whilst O-side assessments 'formulate the evaluation as a feature of the object being assessed' (2017: 511). It is interesting to note that such O-side assessments are presented as being the source of the constraint by S28, even if her previously stated actions do work to orientate to them.

The final extract in this section comprises the interview with S20, who at this stage of the interview has already disclosed a long history of feeling lonely, beginning in her days at school and continuing into her time at university. She has reflected on her upbringing, having lived abroad in several countries, and also having had conversations with her non-British friends about her existential crises and feelings of loneliness. It is at this point that the interviewer asks her about potentially sharing such information with peers on her degree programme.

### Extract 3.12 Student 20 (female, second year)

Int: mm (1.0) so this is not something you'd share with people on your course↓ (.) for example

S20: (0.5) it's just hhhh ((exasperated outbreath)) I- I would (.) I'd like to think I would (.) but it's just (.) really hard- you don't wana be like >HEY LISTEN TO MY STORY< (1.0) constantly (1.0) you wana also l[isten to people (.) and I think=

Int: [hh heh heh (1.0) mm]

S20: = (0.5) there's less people (1.0) in this age group (.) in this country that I've found that want to have those deep conversations↑

- Int: really↑ (0.5) [mm  
 S20: [so there has been (1.0) one of  
 my (0.5) oh (.) >should I not say names  
 in the interv[iew<  
 Int: [you can (.) but I'll- I'll  
 redact them afterwards]  
 S20: so [name] (.) the one you're gona meet  
 (0.5) erm (.) she and I=  
 Int: [mm]  
 S20: =deep conversations (0.5) erm (1.0) and  
 there's a few other friends that (1.0) I  
 think=  
 Int: mm  
 S20: because they and I are both willing (.)  
 and (.) we've built up trust we have deep  
 conversations (.) but then (0.5) a lot  
 of people at university (.) they're just  
 (0.5) it becomes a <crowd> and it's it's  
 just sad that (1.5) I=  
 Int: mm  
 S20: =dunno (0.2) >like I said you don't want  
 to be like (.) HEY GUYS LET'S GO DEEP AND  
TALK ABOUT (.) y'know (0.5) ME (.) AND YOU  
 (.) heh heh heh

The interviewer formulates his question as a statement with negative polarity, in an attempt to elicit an affirmation from S20. Immediately following this there is an affect display realized as a long drawn-out sigh of exasperation (line 3), which seems to signal this topic as a contentious one. Her use of the modal verb 'would' twice in quick succession formulates her as being willing to have such conversations, but this is then contrasted with the seeming recalcitrance of her peers in lines 4–6. The fact that she 'would' have such conversations implies that those conversations (i.e. about loneliness) are currently not forthcoming. She implies that the broaching of such subjects is 'really hard' (line 4) before parodying her own attempts to elicit a favourable response from friends: '>HEY LISTEN TO MY STORY<'. The increased pace of the delivery,

accompanied by the volume increase and the particular emphasis placed on the delivery, all function to caricature herself as someone whose attempts to engage others are unwelcome and somewhat dominating. She distances herself from this identity given that 'you wana also listen to people' (lines 5–6), suggesting that she is acutely aware of reciprocating and reaching out to others on such matters.

In lines 8–9, she then makes an explicit distinction between her peers in Britain and her peers abroad. The emphasis she places on 'want to have' (line 9) implies that in the event that such conversations do occur with British friends, they are not had willingly or without prompting from S20. She characterizes loneliness talk as being an example of 'deep conversations', that is as something which has particular meaning or importance for that person. There is an underlying implication to this which presents British young adults as philosophically superficial in comparison with her other social networks. After an intervening couple of turns in which S20 and the interviewer engage briefly in interview meta-talk (lines 11–14), she formulates one of her fellow university students as someone who has 'deep conversations' like herself. Having previously worked up the difficulty she has had in finding like minds in her British university, she then describes several other friends with whom she is able to engage with on such matters. In stark contrast to the peers mentioned previously, these other friends are ones whom are 'willing' (line 20, note the emphasis) and have 'built up trust' (line 20). She unfavourably characterizes university students generally as being a 'crowd', possibly meaning that it is difficult to connect with them on an individual basis, particularly around socially sensitive topics like loneliness. This is suggested to be 'sad' (line 23), suggesting opportunities for social bonding, or at least this philosophically focused form of social bonding, are being routinely overlooked by a whole demographic of students. She then finally returns to the caricature of herself from the beginning of the extract, where she encourages others to 'GO DEEP' by talking about shared feelings and emotions (lines 25–27).

The constraint presented here, then, is one which is focused very much on differences in cultural norms around emotions, and the public discussion of such feelings with others. The social interactions around

emotion in Britain are talked up as being unwilling, wary and superficial to a degree. This is presented less favourably in relation to such interactions in other culture, with which S20 aligns herself more closely. The inability to prompt or maintain ('deep') conversations around experiences of loneliness is construed itself as a form of loneliness. Her fellow British university students seem unwilling or unable to provide her with the necessary outlet for managing her own feelings on the matter, and thus they are formulated as a source of frustration and of constraint. The friend she specifically mentions in line 15 is revealed later in the interview to be European (not included in this extract) and is subsequently formulated as further proof that people in other countries are more amenable to such talk. This functions as a stake inoculation, whereby S20 defends herself from a perception that she is placing an interactional burden on her peers by emphasizing that this is normal in many other places, albeit seemingly not in Britain.

As we have seen from these two representative examples, the student interviewees orient themselves to cultural norms in order to formulate them as a source of constraint. Whether such norms comprise how one behaves in public (e.g. spending leisure time alone) or what topics are considered to be socially acceptable for public discourse (e.g. 'deep' conversations about feelings of loneliness), the students organize their talk around the presence of deficits in their life. In the case of S28, her peers considered her to be lacking sociability, whereas for S20 the deficit is constructed as residing in others, with their inability to engage with her on certain topics she considers to be important. The formulation for both of them (and for the other students not included here) is always the same: a sense of detachment from the society in which they live, and one which serves to compound the feelings of loneliness they have disclosed.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed three different types of constraint which the students orient to in their loneliness talk. These three types do not occur in isolation, and sometimes are intertwined in the same

stretch of talk around loneliness disclosures. All of the constraints function to manage the students' accountability for their feelings of loneliness, whether it is warranted by a mental disposition they find difficult to alter, formulated as being a fact of life beyond their control, or construed as a cultural yardstick which unfairly 'others' them in some way.

### **Personal Constraints**

Personalities and mental preferences comprise by far the most frequently deployed form of constraint in the student interviews. Students organize their talk around references to a variety of dispositions, most notably that of being a 'workaholic' (even if they don't explicitly deploy this term), and an 'introvert' (for whom social interaction is construed as naturally difficult). The latter comprises those students who talk up their inability to misread social situations and to mishandle social invitations. It also includes those for whom loneliness is seemingly a given, with their talk constructed around the demonstration of their strategies for managing it.

### **Structural Constraints**

Students also sometimes invoke circumstances beyond their control as sources of constraint in being accountable for loneliness. Examples from the data set include being obliged to share one's living space with many strangers, the formulation of the potential for social interaction being paralyzing, a lack of disposable income with which to socialize, and being obliged to work unsociable hours as a temporary barrier to being with friends and family.

### **Cultural Constraints**

Finally, students also refer to generalized norms and expectations regarding social interactions. The two main sub-types of this constraint comprise peers' expectations as to how one spends leisure time, and an inability to have 'deep' (i.e. introspective) conversations about feelings and emotions with peers.

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# 4

## Invoking Social Credentials

### Introduction

When disclosing experiences of loneliness, students find themselves in the potentially difficult interactional position of having to account for the reasons behind them feeling lonely. There is often a need to demonstrate that one has tried to improve their condition as much as possible, to ward off possible accusations of being responsible for their feelings. To this end, one major theme to emerge from the data set concerns the students' frequent working up of their social credentials around the disclosures of loneliness. The vast majority of students who disclosed difficulties in the interviews undertook at some point to counter the notion that they are unsociable and thus adversely implicated in their own loneliness.

The concept of 'credentials' attests to the qualities, achievements or experiences with which someone vouches for a course of action. These may be formal and/or informal in nature. For example, formal requirements for a career in medicine in the UK currently require relevant undergraduate degrees and many years of specialist training. The informal requirements for such a role may comprise excellent communication skills, empathy,

resilience and other cognate personality traits. In the student interview data, it is observed that students regularly work up their credentials as sociable people in two ways. Firstly, they attest to personality traits which predispose them to acting sociably. And secondly, they formulate their non-university social networks as being especially large and varied in order to contrast favourably with the deficit that they are currently experiencing.

In many cases, students invoke both types of credential, but we shall separate them out here for the purposes of comment and analysis. We turn first to the discussion of social dispositions. An interesting point to note concerns the differential use of dispositions around identity work in the interviews. For example, Chapter 3 on the deployment of Constraints deals with a range of dispositions (e.g. being ‘introverted’) formulated as unhelpful for mitigating experiences of loneliness. Here, on the other hand, we see a reversal in their usage. Some dispositions are treated as beneficial and construed as effective in warding off the preconditions for social isolation.

## Invoking Social Dispositions

The most frequent social credential invoked in the data comprises formulations of a social disposition, which comprises personality traits that make social interaction more likely for that person. Dispositions form an important interactional resource for the management of identity in interactions. They allow speakers to perform a range of different functions, from deflecting responsibility for one’s actions, to presenting them as natural and inevitable, and closing down perceptions of why a speaker has acted in a certain way. There are three general sub-types identified within this category, each of which will be discussed in turn. The first sub-type talks of underlying social dispositions, the second of underlying social dispositions in contexts where peer interaction is difficult and the third of a preference for small friendship groups. The first two may seem very similar, but they have been separated into distinct sub-categories on the basis that the former deals with sociability in all occasions, whereas the latter comprises sociability specifically away from the university context.

## Social Dispositions

The first extract comprises the middle portion of the interview with Student 35. In the stretch of talk immediately before this segment she discusses how she has experienced loneliness towards the beginning of her university course. Following the account of these difficulties in her first year, the interviewer then asks if she would describe herself as a lonely person.

### Extract 4.1 Student 35 (female, final year)

- Int: would you describe yourself (.) as a  
lonely person↓
- S35: (1.8) no::
- Int: (0.4) why:↑
- S35: (0.8) I hate (.) I hate being on my ow:n  
(0.4) I get bor:ed
- Int: mm
- S35: erm (3.6) yeah I d- I lit- (.) I'm always  
(1.0) I USED TO enjoy (.) I realized  
>recently I used to enjoy< like (1.2) at  
home (.) sitting in (0.6) m- like my room  
on my ow::n
- Int: mm↑
- S35: but recently (0.2) cos I'm always like  
with people now when I go home I'm (.)  
I don't >flike sitting in my room on my  
ownf<
- Int: mm
- S35: I'm so used to (0.2) having company all  
the ti::me↑

At the beginning of this extract, S35 pauses for a moment before replying categorically that she would not describe herself as a lonely person. The categorical nature of the response elicits a request for clarification from the interviewer, given that moments before she had been recounting several prior episodes of loneliness during her studies. She responds

with a mental dispreference ('hate'), which she repeats, for being on her own. This dispreference does not appear to be context-bound, and so the impression is formulated that she is generally predisposed to avoiding loneliness in all contexts (e.g. at home, at university). She then attests a dispositional formulation in line 4, where 'I get bor:ed'. Again the iterative aspect of the verb 'to get' signals this cognition as the inevitable outcome of her spending time by herself. The implication is thus formed that loneliness is not a present concern for her, because she is not on her own for long enough to begin feeling lonely.

In the subsequent lines, she begins to reinforce her comment ('I lit[erally]', and 'I'm always') with script formulations, before abandoning it to incorporate another social disposition. She places particular emphasis on having 'USED TO enjoy' the fact that she spent time by herself in her room, of course implying that this is no longer the case. This is then contrasted with recent events where 'I'm always like with people now' (line 10). Thus not only does she formulate herself as already being predisposed to seek social interaction due to a low boredom threshold, she now no longer has the opportunities regardless to engage in such alone time. The potential for loneliness is thus presented as doubly minimized. Consequently she states that she does not '>£like sitting in my room on my own£<' (line 11). The mental preference from earlier is now reversed, and the abrupt change is accompanied prosodically by a rapid delivery of speech and smiley voice, indicating a potential orientation to doubt about her original formulation (Glenn 2003). Her final comment in the extract outlines her normalizing of social interaction 'all the ti::me↑', suggesting the force of repetition has changed her personal disposition for wanting to be alone.

The image S35 paints is one of intolerance to social absence, in part because of a predisposition for boredom, and in part due to a change in the level and frequency of her social interactions so that at the point of the interview, she now considers herself to be never lonely. Her disclosure of a previous disposition for temporary social isolation seems to concede that she has not always been fully immune to feeling lonely, but this is then subsequently worked up as a point of contrast for her present social interconnectedness. The sense that one's behaviour

does not allow for loneliness is reflected in many of the other student interviews. Consider now part of the transcript with Student 29 below.

**Extract 4.2** Student 29 (female, final year)

Int: mm and would you say you've (1.0) been lonely since coming to university (.) at any point

S29: er:::m (6.4) I wouldn't say so (0.8) cos I feel like I'm one of those people when I do feel like that I'll kinda make (0.6) it an effort to not (0.4) feel like that

Int: °mhm°

S29: >like I kinda like to< feel included kind of thing (1.0) but erm (0.4) yeah no not rea:::lly as much (0.6) erm (2.0) or like if I'm just yeah (.) if I'm like alone with like with all my like (0.8) work I've got to do and then I'm literally on my own realizing that and my thoughts then yeah (.) fair enough (*conceding tone*) I could (0.4) yeah you could say that (0.6) be a bit loneliness (0.4) be a bit lonely

Int: mm

S29: er:m (.) yeah↓

This extract is taken from near the beginning of the interview with S29. At this point, the student has been asked in broad terms about the range of emotions and feelings students generally experience at university. The interviewer then stipulates that the focus of the subsequent interview talk will be on negative feelings first, at which point he asks her whether she has felt lonely at any point during her degree. There is a very long pause of 6.4 seconds at the beginning of her turn, and usually such lengthy pauses indicate a degree of interactional trouble around the topic under discussion (Jefferson 1989). The pause is followed by a mitigated denial which contains the modal verb 'would', suggesting

she is not fully invested in the veracity of the response. What comes next is interesting, in that she formulates herself as ‘one of those people’ (lines 3–4) who are proactive in managing negative feelings. It is never specified who exactly ‘those people’ are, though clearly the exophoric reference is intended to be hearable as shared knowledge with the interviewer. She aligns herself with this putative category of person, which formulates a precedent for her disposition: that is, there is nothing unusual about behaving like this in reaction to an absence of social stimuli. She draws attention to her own formulation, which is rendered explicitly in the cognition ‘I feel’ (line 3). This mitigates the certainty she invests in this category of ‘those people’ and seems designed to deflect a perception of immodesty in her self-appraisal (see Locke 2003, 2008 for detailed studies on how emotion terms are used to manage appearances of [im]modesty in talk).

The emphasis in ‘when I do feel like that’ (line 4) implies that feeling lonely is not a regular occurrence for her, given that it is construed as an eventuality that has to be catered for, rather than one which is to be expected. She states that her ‘effort to not (0.4) feel like that’ (line 5) is an automatic response to the intrusion of lonely feelings in her life, something which is suggested by the dispositional formulation ‘when I do feel like that...’. Having talked up this dispositional safety mechanism for dealing with loneliness, she spends the next few lines of the extract reinforcing this with a second complementary sociable disposition: ‘>like I kinda like to<feel included’ (line 7). She thus presents herself as someone who feels a sense of reward by taking part in social interactions. Her mental preference for feeling included implicitly sets up the oppositional contrast (Jeffries 2010) that she dislikes feeling excluded. This comment is rounded off by returning to the original question of whether she has felt lonely at university, to which she responds again ‘yeah no not rea:::lly as much’ (line 8). The elongation of the vowel sound in the adverb ‘really’ functions here as a mitigation and attends to the potential interactional difficulty of categorically denying a question for a second time.

Interestingly, S29 then seems to counter her own arguments by conceding that under certain circumstances she does indeed experience loneliness, despite her previously stipulated disposition. She resolves this

by drawing upon the pressures of academic work as exacerbating what would be an otherwise manageable period of alone time. The mention of her university work functions as a constraint on her construction of an otherwise efficient dispositional coping mechanism. In line 10, she draws attention to being ‘literally’ on her own in such circumstances, which she seems to function as an intensifier increasingly common in modern English usage (Israel 2002), rather than meaning the opposite to ‘figuratively’. The occasioning of her loneliness seems to occur only when she realizes (line 10) the enormity of her personal obligations to her university work: ‘if I’m like alone with like with all my like (0.8) work I’ve got to do’ (lines 9–10). The loneliness is thus constructed as temporary, external and event-driven (Edwards 1999), providing a ‘perfect storm’ for overriding her ability to cope.

In summary, S29 presents herself as someone who is not easily affected by feelings of loneliness. She works up a proactive social disposition as evidence for her ability to deal with these feelings, thus carefully engaging in blame avoidance for her emotions. Even when she does disclose present feelings of loneliness, these are tied to factors beyond the control of her underlying disposition. Her university work is talked up (‘all my like (0.8) work’) as an adverse influence which tends to override her coping mechanisms, but it is an influence which is contextually contingent. Only when work threatens to overwhelm her is she unable to feel like ‘one of those people’ (lines 3–4).

## Sociable Despite One’s Circumstances

The next sub-type of social dispositions invoked in the interviews comprises the opposite situation to the one we have just observed with Student 29. Whereas this student construed herself as sociable by default until external circumstances dictated otherwise, the next example deals with a student who presents as sociable despite factors militating against opportunities for social interaction. This constitutes a key difference between the two sub-categories. The former focuses on situations where it is easy to be sociable, whilst this one covers situations where it is not so straightforward. Consider the extract below, which is

a typical example of this sub-category, taken from the interview with Student 6. The student is responding to the interviewer's question from several lines ago (not shown here for brevity) about how she would describe herself and brings up the feeling of loneliness unprompted.

### Extract 4.3 Student 6 (female, first year)

S6: I think I can come across as quite lonely  
sometim:es (0.6) erm in the sense that I  
don't have loads of groups of friends and  
I often tend to stick with my few people  
I do socialise with

Int: mm

S6: .h I think at university I've not (0.6)  
had the same friendship groups as other  
people because of the fact that I commute

Int: mm

S6: so (0.4) while I'm friendly with people  
(.) throughout the day (0.2) and in lec-  
tures and in the academic setting of 'ooh  
(0.2) let's have lunch together because  
we've got a seminar and then a lecture' =

Int: mm

S6: =(1.0) but then (0.4) when everyone goes  
out in the evening I'm not involved in  
that because I just go home↑

Int: mm

S6: so (0.2) I don't (0.2) necessarily have  
the friendship groups in that sense so (.)  
you could class me as lonely in that way:  
(0.2) but hh (0.2) I dunno (.) I think  
(0.2) I'm quite open to friendships so↓ =

Int: mm

S6: =I can be quite happy in the way that  
(0.2) y'know (0.2) I'm very happy to make  
new friends an:d (0.4) put myself in new  
settings like I'll make friends at work  
very easily if there's someone new .hh erm

(0.4) and I don't have any issues with the number of friends I actually have [(.)] like I'm very=

- Int: [mm]
- S6: =happy to (.) you know (0.4) socialise with people and organise things hh (0.2) friends coming back from uni I'll always (0.2) y'know make an effort to (0.2) to organise something with them (.) so: (0.2) YEAH (.) I'D SAY IN THE MIDDLE (0.2) I CAN GET MORE LONELY (0.2) if I haven't done something with friends in a while

Interestingly for our purposes, she proffers herself as appearing 'quite lonely' (line 1), even though the question did not request a specific focus on this feeling. Whilst there had been previous questions about defining various emotions and feelings, of which loneliness was one, these were superseded by talk about her interactions with peers in her university classes. Her return to this matter thus seems more influenced by topical concerns, rather than sequential ones (i.e. she wanted to talk about this topic at this point, rather than being primed to do so by the interviewer in the preceding turns). She begins by troubling her membership within the category of lonely people given that she 'can come across as quite lonely sometim:es' (line 1). This is achieved firstly by deploying the epistemic modal marker 'can', which simultaneously allows for the possibility of *not* appearing lonely, and for suggesting that she is not in fact lonely (she just appears that way). This is further modulated by emphasizing that this potential for seeming lonely is not a regular occurrence, and it is only one which occurs on occasion. The choice of the phrasal verb 'come across [as]' is also performing crucial interactional work, in that it places the burden for category membership on other people, and not herself. Her putative loneliness exists only in the eye of the beholder, and thus is formulated as potentially not having any solid basis in reality.

She qualifies such worked up perceptions as being derived from her not having 'loads of groups of friends' (line 2) and tending to 'stick with my few people I do socialise with' (line 3). At first glance, the

description of the absence of friends is worded unusually, given that she could easily have said that she does not have 'loads of friends'. The inclusion of 'groups' serves to scale up the number of friendships, so that when the social deficit is referred to, the remaining social network benefits from the resulting sense of inflation. The implication is that she does have 'groups' of friends, note the plural form and the collective noun, just not very many of them. The alternative of not having many 'friends' would formulate her as being perceptibly less sociable than she is otherwise trying to convey. This point is followed by her statement that she prefers to socialize with 'my few people' (line 3), which inadvertently challenges the quality of the social 'groups' she has just spoken about. This is because of the implication that anyone not in the category of 'my few people' comprises people she does not prefer to socialize with, rendering such social networks as a little more superficial in nature.

Next she elaborates on the status of her friendships still further by invoking what I have referred to elsewhere as a Structural Constraint (see Chapter 3): she has been constrained in her ability to form friendships 'because of the fact that I commute' (line 6), indicating this as the sole barrier to her becoming part of the social networks within university. It is at this point that she initiates a concerted effort to work up her sociability over the course of many lines. She begins by stipulating that she is 'friendly with people' in and outside of her university classes (line 8). She also deploys a script formulation around a typical social invitation (lines 9–10) to have lunch together between lectures. It is unclear whether S6 means that she is the one who provides the invitation, or whether that responsibility is shared with her peers, but regardless the result is that she is implicating herself in proactively initiating and managing opportunities for social interaction. She construes evening social interactions as being not possible for her because 'I just go home↑' (line 13). The second script formulation of 'everyone' going out in the evening highlights the totality of her exclusion, even if in reality not every person socializes at night. S6 seems to conflate evening social activities with ones which last all evening and possibly ones involving alcohol (which would discount her participation due to the commute home). She does not account for any other type of evening social interaction, only the ones which will guarantee her non-participation.

She then returns to the perceptions of her which were introduced at the beginning of the extract. In line 16, she proffers that one could ‘class me as lonely in that way’, with the emphasis on ‘that’ opening up possibilities for other criteria which would otherwise exonerate her as not being lonely (see Martin and White 2005 on dialogic expansion). What follows is another sustained sequence of social credential-building, beginning with her self-assessment as being ‘quite open to friendships’ (line 17). She invokes a cognition about being ‘quite happy’, which she subsequently upgrades to being ‘very happy’, about proactively seeking new opportunities for social interactions. She invokes another credential in her capacity to ‘make friends at work very easily’ (line 21), thus demonstrating that in other non-university-related environments she is both willing and able to forge friendships. Not only this, she formulates herself as welcoming to new work colleagues (line 21) and proactively organizing social engagements with returning friends who have gone to different universities (line 26). Her insistence on not having an issue with the quantity of her friendships in lines 22–23 somewhat belies her previous efforts to talk up their number in line 2, though the present formulation is intended to maximize her social credentials as much as possible. Throughout her response, she makes a concerted effort to appear the instigator of social interactions. Her agency is foregrounded in the choices of verbs that she deploys, for example she is able to ‘*make* new friends’, is happy to ‘*socialise* with people’, ‘*organize* things’ and ‘*organize* something with them’, all of which imply her stake in managing her social relationships.

Towards the end of her turn, S6 explicitly orients her response back to the interviewer’s original question. Her concession that she can become lonely is delivered with relatively increased volume and emphasis to the surrounding talk, highlighting her abrupt switch of topic. Her reference to the ‘middle’ calls back to a continuum of loneliness (from ‘not lonely at all’ to ‘lonely all the time’) previously formulated by the interviewer in a previous turn. Her concession that she feels loneliness is thus downplayed as being only of moderate significance to her, and which she ties exclusively to the script formulation of ‘if I haven’t done something with friends in a while’ (lines 28–29). The overall effect of her account is to affirm her social character by providing a range of instances where she

has demonstrated sociability, at home, at work and at university. She initially formulates loneliness as something that only others perceive to her be despite later conceding that she does feel lonely, albeit in very specific circumstances. Finally, she spends some time in her response accounting for her normatively small friendship group. She posits that she has not had access to some social circles at university because of the restrictions of her daily commute, but equally she emphasizes her contentment with the small number of friends that she does have.

As we have seen of the examples in this sub-category, social dispositions can function as rhetorically powerful resources for constructing a sense of one's own sociality. They allow the students to imply the existence of internal coping mechanisms, and for talking up a sense of their investment in social networks by displaying preferences for social interaction and proactivity in managing those interactions.

## Predisposed to Wanting Fewer Friends

The final subset of social dispositions concerns a stated preference for smaller groups of friends. It concerns the reformulation of small social networks not as hallmarks of loneliness or unsociability, but as an intentional choice for maintaining healthy social connections. The previous extract included an instance of this, where S6 stated that she tends 'to stick with my few people I do socialise with' (Extract 4.3, line 3). A common feature in students' deployment of this rhetorical device is to positively evaluate the smallness of one's social group, whilst simultaneously questioning the quality of friendships in larger groups. Extract 4.4, below, is taken from the middle of the interview with Student 9 and immediately follows a stretch of talk where she problematizes her own ability to make friends.

### **Extract 4.4** Student 9 (female, first year)

Int: °mhm° (1.4) .h are you happy with the  
number of friends that you have

S9: (0.8) yeah I've always been (0.4) the type of person (.) that favours like (.) close (1.2) relationships with (0.2) very little people=

Int: mm

S9: =(0.4) rather than having loads of friends °who I don't really know very well or care about° (0.4) so I'd rather have (0.4) yeah like (0.2) two or three (1.0) close friends (0.2) °I think°

Int: mm (0.4) ok

The interviewer begins his turn by asking S9 to evaluate the number of friends that she has. As noted above, this comes immediately after a discussion of friendship deficits at university, at which the student has displayed a sense of frustration. Similarly to S29 in Extract 4.2 in the previous section, S9 invokes a prototypical 'type of person' (line 2) with which she orients herself to. This formulated category comprises people who display preferences for a particular type of relationship ('close') and with a particular number of people ('very little' [sic]). She contrasts herself to other people for whom such close relationships are implicitly not of primary importance, thus indirectly evaluating herself positively for having such few friendships. She draws attention to this contrast much more explicitly in line 5, when she draws an inference between having many friends and not truly knowing or caring about them. She is invoking a continuum of sociality here whereby the more friends one acquires, the less able one is to engage satisfactorily in social interactions with them. This is then posited as a justification for her mental preference in lines 6–7, whereby she would prefer very few friends.

Even in this small stretch of interview talk, there is a lot of 'interactional business' being attended to by Student 9. She normalizes her predisposition for fewer friends by invoking a typical category of person for whom such numbers are normal and expected. She draws an implicit correlation between the number of friends one has and the quality of the friendships one has with them. Finally, she formulates a generalized unwillingness to engage in the perceived hallmarks of a friendship (to 'know' them and to 'care about' them) as representative of larger and

'looser' social networks. All of these rhetorical devices are designed to present her reality of having few friends at university as advantageous, and distinctly preferable to having a wider network of social contacts with whom she engages only briefly. By doing this she wards off a possible connection the interviewer may make between her few friendships and a cause for the feelings of loneliness she disclosed in the preceding turns. Admitting that one is lonely because of the absence of friends places the agency and responsibility for it on the individual. It leaves open the possibility that their interlocutor may exhort them to 'go out and make friends'. As we have observed here, this hypothetical rejoinder can be avoided by reformulating small friendship groups as intentional and preferred, uncoupling the concept of loneliness from norms around the size and range of one's social circle.

One final example around the disclosure of preferences for small friendships concerns the interview with Student 5. Unlike the student in the previous example, S5 explicitly problematizes smaller friendship groups, even though she has previously invoked it as a social credential. This presents an interesting dilemma for the student. On the one hand, fewer friends are presented as being advantageous and thus formulate the speaker as very sociable, albeit on a smaller scale to some of her peers. On the other hand, fewer friends are acknowledged by S5 as meaning very limited options for alternative interactions should those friends be temporarily unavailable.

#### **Extract 4.5** Student 5 (female, first year)

Int: and (0.4) did you feel this way (.) before  
coming to the UK

S5: yes (.) erm (0.6) I felt lonely before  
because (0.2) erm (.) I have (1.0) .hh  
I HAVE VERY FEW FRIENDS (.) which I said  
was good=

Int: mm

S5: =but at the same time (0.2) erm (0.4) I'm  
busy and they're busy and sometimes they

can't (0.2) get in touch when I need them  
to be there↑

Int: mm

S5: so: (.) that's sometimes can result in  
me (.) feeling like (0.4) I'm not wanted  
just because they're not available at  
that particular time

Int: mm

S5: (0.4) °so I think that's (0.4) one of the  
factors°

Int: and do they know that you feel this way

S5: .hh some of them do huh huh fnot all of  
them£ (0.4) erm (.) I usually try not to  
(0.2) put pressure on my friends sort of  
(unclear) feel (0.2) I wouldn't say (.)  
like (.) 'I felt really bad yesterday  
and you were busy (0.2) how dare you be  
like [that] (.) you are supposed to be my  
friend' and I'm=

Int: [mm]

S5: =like 'oh it's fine I dealt with it (0.2)  
so (0.4) now I'm better' and (0.4) that's  
(1.0) yep (.) but (unclear) more empha-  
sis (on) (0.4) the present moment and how  
it's different than (0.2) before (0.4)  
[rather] than explaining to them=

Int: [mm]

S5: =why: I (.) reached out in the first  
(place)

Int: mm mm

The initial interviewer's question in line 1 hearkens back to S5's previous disclosures that she had felt lonely ('this way') on a regular basis back in her home country, shortly before coming to study in the UK. She affirms that she felt lonely before orienting to a previous stretch of interview talk several minutes prior, where she worked up the many perceived benefits of her small friendship group. Here, however, she begins to unpack and mitigate that social credential. Her repetition of

the statement that she has very few friends (line 3) is made with sudden emphasis, possibly suggesting some discomfort at drawing attention to it, or potentially signalling that what she is about to say will contrast with this previous positive assessment of her situation. What comes next is indeed a contrast, whereby her initial evaluation of her social interactions being 'good' is replaced with an extended discussion of the potential pitfalls it carries. Interestingly, she is the only student in the interview data set to reformulate a social credential as problematic and thus as something both good and bad.

Her first comment about the limitations of having few friends is construed via a script formulation in line 5, whereby sometimes 'I'm busy and they're busy'. The friends she refers to comprise individuals both in the UK on her degree programme and also people back in her home country with whom she keeps in semi-regular contact. The references to being busy present their lives as being routinely unavailable for social interaction, and the fact that both parties (her and her friends) are presented as having other commitments implicates them both in the potential impasse. The result for S5 is that her friends are unable ('can't (0.2) get in touch') to provide support for her when 'I need them to be there' (line 6). The presence of two modality markers in this sentence highlights S5's orientation to the obligations and abilities friends are construed as having with one another. She places considerable stress on the verb 'need', drawing the interviewer's attention not only to her desire to have her friends communicate with her, but also to her seeming reliance on others to help control her feelings and emotions. This is presented as a routine occurrence via the iterative aspect, thus functioning as a dispositional formulation. It also allows for the inference to be drawn that she is dependent on her friends, thus implicating her in not taking responsibility for her own loneliness by diversifying her support networks.

She goes on to illustrate the consequences of her friends' occasional unavailability, as it results in her feeling like 'I'm not wanted' (lines 8–9). This presents a potential interactional issue for S5. For example, there is a very real risk that she will appear socially demanding of her friends whenever she draws an explicit connection between them being busy and them seemingly not wanting to speak to her. It also has the

potential to make her seem unreasonable, given the unlikelihood of two people being in a constant state of social interaction, a problem exacerbated by the geographical distance between S5 and some of her friends. She does deploy the phrase 'feeling like' in line 8 to signal her acknowledgement of this perception existing only in her mind rather than in reality and thus attends to both of the interactional issues previously mentioned. She then summarizes the busy-ness of her friends as 'one of the factors' affecting her feelings of loneliness, therefore implying the existence of others.

The interviewer then tries to elicit whether her friends are aware of the way she feels, to which S5 responds that it varies between friends. She orients once again to the interactional business of not seeming unreasonable or demanding of her friends when she says 'I usually try not to (0.2) put pressure on my friends sort of' (line 14). Thus even though she may find herself feeling very lonely, she is careful to present herself as being considerate of the needs of others here. Notice also how she deploys the modal adverb 'usually' to present her actions as the rule rather than as an exception, and how she downgrades the act of putting pressure on her friends with 'sort of', thus minimizing the apparent impact she has on them when she seeks their emotional support. Having spent time warding off the prospect of seeming unreasonable, she then actively talks up her reasonableness by outlining a course of action she would not take. In lines 15–17, she construes a hypothetical scenario where she castigates one of her friends for being busy, and that they are 'supposed to be my friend'. Her mock performance of doing unreasonableness functions to make her own social demands seem less obtrusive by comparison. The hypothetical speech is designed to be hearable as ludicrous and therefore not as an accurate reflection of the speaker. Her actual response to such a situation is then formulated immediately afterwards, and it presents her much more favourably than the caricature she has just created. For example, the second response of 'oh it's fine I dealt with it (0.2) so (0.4) now I'm better' renders the situation as not showing a lack of social support and instead focuses on S5's internal states whereby she is 'fine', has 'dealt with it' and therefore is now 'better'. Her ability to not only pay lip service to reasonableness, but also to demonstrate what it would look like in practice, serves to

defend her from any adverse comments about her behaviour over the course of the interaction with the interviewer.

Her remaining comments in this extract overtly relay the thinking behind her genuine responses to friends in such situations. She formulates a preference for focusing on the moment of disclosure rather than reflecting on the perceived slight her friends have given her by not being available at the correct time. All of S5's comments on this matter provide for an intricate and fascinating backdrop to her invocation of small friendship groups as a social credential. Such friendships have to be managed and maintained like any others, but the social stakes are considerably higher when alternative opportunities for interaction are seemingly not possible. This extract therefore encapsulates the highly important point that we should not consider social credentials as static monolithic entities. Rather a mental disposition for smaller social circles is only considered a boon when it functions well for the speaker. It ceases to function as a credential when it fails to demonstrate the sociability of the speaker, and thus social credentials should only ever be labelled as such *in context*. A preference, a disposition or (as we are about to find out next) a social network is wholly contingent on the interactional functions they are able to provide. With this in mind, we shall now turn to the next major theme within this chapter.

## Invoking Social Networks

The second of the two major themes in this chapter comprises students' interactional work around describing their friendships. Given the potential for disclosures of loneliness to cast the student in an unsociable light, it is perhaps not surprising that how one talks up the range and quality of friendships becomes a central concern in the interviews. Again there are two significant sub-types. The first deals with students who explicitly vouch for the existence of friendships. This may seem like a trivial matter, but in conversations about how one feels able to interact with others (or not), this rhetorical device takes on an urgent interactional accomplishment. Left unspecified, there is always the risk that one's interlocutor will form an unfavourable impression of the speaker

if the issue of friendship is not directly addressed. The second sub-type in this category deals with the other end of the scale: where students emphasize and talk up the range or quality of their existing friendship groups. Very often the students talk specifically about their friendship groups back in their home town or country. This is done in order to provide a favourable contrast to the present situation of having few or no friends at university. It is a credential, and a way of attesting to one's ability to meet cultural norms around friendships and social interactions more generally. A final point to note is that 'social networks' can encompass more than just friends: it may include family members, work colleagues, online acquaintances and so on.

## Vouching for Friendships

The first of the categories deals with students for whom proof of friendship is an urgent interactional concern following a disclosure of loneliness. Students demonstrating this rhetorical device almost always deploy it in tandem with the loneliness disclosure itself, perhaps as a way of pre-empting a foreseeable query from the interviewer. Even for those individuals with very few social contacts, the issue of friendship is a recognizable cultural norm, and one which has to be accounted for whenever one's social interactions are called into question. The first example comes from near the beginning of the interview with Student 14. In response to a speculative and open-ended question from the interviewer about which emotion S14 has experienced the most of at university, he responds that loneliness has most characterized his time thus far.

### Extract 4.6 Student 14 (male, first year)

Int: a:nd (.) which emotion (0.2) and this can  
be any emotion .h (0.4) which emotion would  
you say has most characterized your time  
at university (0.6) so far

S14: (3.0) °erm° (8.0) probably (2.2) I would say (0.2) loneliness but not (0.6) in the sense that (1.0) I have no friends here=

Int: mm

S14: =in the sense that (0.2) being (0.6) away from: (0.4) like my home life so (0.4) er: (.) friends at home my parents an:d (0.4) er (.) family=

Int: mhm

S14: =and it's erm (2.2) it's strange being away from (0.2) that life that I did know and now (0.4) °somewhere in a° (0.2) different city=

Int: mm

S14: =°different county (2.0) so:°

S14's response to the interviewer's question is preceded by two extremely long (in conversational terms) pauses. The second pause of eight seconds is the longest in their entire data set and highlights the apparent difficulty S14 had in choosing how to respond to the question. Eventually after a further pause of 2.2 seconds, he proffers loneliness as his defining emotion at university so far. Having disclosed such feelings, he then immediately qualifies it by stating that he does not meet the usual criterion for loneliness of having no friends (line 5). Instead, he formulates loneliness as something akin to homesickness, whereby his feelings relate to the friends and family members that he has left behind in his home city, which is a considerably long way away from his university city. He describes his present situation as 'strange' in line 11, which serves to talk up the unfamiliarity and unexpectedness of his life now compared to his life before university. It also serves to normalize his resulting feelings of loneliness, in that he is responding logically to what he constructs as a highly unusual change of circumstances.

There seems to be a sense of loss and detachment in the way he formulates the comparison between descriptions of his home life and his life at university. His choice of the noun phrase 'the life that I did know' (lines 11–12) suggests it is one that he no longer recognizes himself as inhabiting. The fact that he describes himself as being only 'somewhere'

in his new city and county is seemingly indicative of a sense of disorientation: he presents himself as being geographically and emotionally unable to ‘anchor’ himself in his new surroundings. The vouching of his friendships at home forms an important part of the disorientating comparison he makes, though these are friendships which currently exist only elsewhere for him. Neither in this extract or anywhere else in his interview did S14 disclose any friends he had made since coming to university, and thus it is perhaps telling that the only mention of friendships for this student comprises a token description accompanying the disclosure of loneliness.

As we saw with a previous example (see Extract 4.5), a fact or dispositions’ status as a social credential is highly contingent on its interactional function within the context in which it was uttered. In the case of S14, friendships and relationships with family back home are marshalled as evidence of sociability, though this seems to be ineffectively deployed in the interview given that it does not deflect perceptions of loneliness within the present moment. In the next extract, we can once again observe the pattern of stating the existence of friendships following shortly after a disclosure of loneliness, which in this case occurs several lines before the onset of the extract. For this student, loneliness has occurred only fleetingly in the first few weeks of university. At this point in the interview, the interviewer moves on from S12’s brief mention of loneliness to ask her about whether she is satisfied with the number of friends that she has.

**Extract 4.7** Student 12 (female, first year)

Int: are you happy with the number of friends you have

S12: (2.6) y:::es (0.4) erm (0.2) yes (.) I think (0.6) erm (0.6) I think I maybe I would have liked to have made a few more friends at university (0.8) but (0.2) I’m like still everyday meeting people (.) and °forming those relationships° (.) so I know that’s not like (.) instant .h (.)

and I do have some really great friends  
at university already↑ .hh (0.4) erm  
[(0.2) (unclear)]

Int: [why would you like to (.) more friends]

S12: (1.4) how ((clarificatory tone))

Int: no (.) why would [you like to (0.2) make  
more]

S12: [why]

er:m↑ (0.4) it's a good question

Int: fthis interview gets qui- (.) quite deep  
in placesf= huh huh huh

S12: =fye::ah (.) that's quite a good questionf  
(0.2) er:m↑ (2.4) not tonnes more (.) I'd  
(.) I do like (0.4) value (0.4) quality  
over quantity=

Int: mm

S12: =erm: (2.4) fwell it sounds quite bad (.)  
to likef (.) have (2.0) variety (0.2) of  
my (0.6) choice like (.) cos y'know you  
lose friends and (0.6) you (1.2) have  
different things in common with differ-  
ent people (0.2) so you wana find (1.2)  
I DUNNO I °just like having friends and°  
(0.2) going with (them) and stuff and  
(0.2) like I've realized (0.4) quality  
over quantity is so much (0.2) so impor-  
tant because (.) now that I've left high  
school (0.2) and y'know I saw .hh (0.4)  
loads of people every day (.) and I talk  
to people (unclear) loads of people every  
day and I'm only in contact with (0.4)  
like three people from high school and  
then like (0.2) two from [home city] that  
I've known all my life↑=

Int: mm

S12: =but they're like (0.4) <best friends>  
(1.4) so (0.4) °yeah°

There is a fairly lengthy pause before S12 responds to the interviewer's question, which is perhaps due in part to the evaluative nature of the question. Her initial affirmation is performed as hesitant, given the prolonged quality to the consonant sound in 'y:::es' (line 2), but this is then repeated with more apparent certainty after another momentary pause. She draws attention to a potential deficit in her social relationships at university by stating 'I would have liked to have made a few more friends at university' (lines 2–4). This mental preference is prefaced with two instances of epistemic modality in the form of 'I think' and 'maybe', highlighting *not* that she is unsure of what she is saying but rather that she is downplaying her investment in the search for more social contacts. Had she not done so, several interactional issues would have presented themselves. Firstly, if she had seemed too eager to search for new companions, this would have allowed negative inferences to be made about S12 regarding her attitude towards any existing friendships she may have, which would have seemed insufficient for her. Secondly, a palpable over-investment in the search for new friends would have allowed a further unfavourable inference to be drawn regarding her motivations for seeking out new friendships, comprising a preoccupation with the acquisition of more and more friends at the possible expense of meaningful relationships with them. Thus what on the surface may appear like a simple rhetorical exercise in uncertainty, Discursive Psychology is able to highlight the underlying interactional concerns which the students orient themselves to.

In line 4, she states via the progressive aspect that 'meeting' new people and 'forming' relationships are an ongoing process for her, and that her perceived lack of success so far does not preclude any further social interactions. She thus presents herself as proactive in seeking new friends, acknowledging that the formation of friendships is not an 'instant' (line 6) matter. In the next segment, she makes explicit the interactional identity work she was only previously implying, when she vouches for having some 'really great friends at university already' (lines 6–7). The overtly positive assessment of such friends as 'great', which has itself been subsequently upgraded to 'really great', works to shut down the inference that her search for more friends is no reflection on the ones she currently has. This line also performs important accounting

work, given that it follows a short sequence in which she has repeatedly implied a deficit of social relationships in her life at university. It highlights that she does indeed have friends, despite the previously stated expectations that she would have more.

The interviewer then seeks to elicit a reason for the repeated preference for having more friends in line 8. S12 mishears a part of the question, the interviewer clarifies, and then a brief sequence comprising meta-talk about the interview plays out whereby the interviewer playfully responds to her evaluation of his enquiry as a 'good question' (line 12). After this brief interlude, S12 repeats the question again to herself and pauses for several seconds. At this point, she makes explicit the second concern which before she had only implicitly oriented to. She states she does not want 'tonnes more' friends, and that she values 'quality over quantity', which work up her desires as being meaningful and not superficially motivated. The presence of smiley voice in line 18 mitigates a potentially (rhetorically) troubling admission that she would like to have a variety of friends to interact with, which she evaluates as 'quite bad'. She reflects on the transient nature of some friendships, and the different interests she may have with each of them, before closing her talk with 'I DUNNO °just like having friends'. Having inadvertently backed herself into a rhetorical corner by vocalizing a desire for social variety, she then resorts to deploying a mental predisposition for liking social contact as a way of showing her intentions are not contrived.

Interestingly, after she returns to the notion of quality over quantity in line 23, she invokes a contrast between her school days and her present reality at university. Formerly she saw and talked to 'loads of people every day', a formulation which is repeated, but only 'three people' have stayed in contact with her after leaving school. This vignette is hearable as a demonstration of the importance of the quality over quantity issue that she has just been addressing. This favourable contrast is compounded by the three friends' elevated status as 'best friends' (line 30). Thus, we can observe over the course of this extract how this student's attendance to rhetorical inferences shapes the way in which she addresses questions of social deficit at university. Even for students who construe loneliness as having very little relevance for them, as is

the case for Student 12, there is still often a great deal of interactional footwork required to manage the impressions they convey about their sociability, the quality of their social interactions and their motivations for seeking friendship. The invocation of existing friendships plays an important role in managing implicit questions of accountability around loneliness.

## Talking Up One's Social Circle

The second type of social credential moves beyond the mere existence of friendships, and instead the students invoke some special or maximal quality to their social circles. In practice all of the mentions comprise social networks in the students' home cities rather than at university. Indeed, they are provided as counters to a perceived interactional deficit within their new university environments. As we have seen in the previous section, sometimes it is not enough merely to state the existence of friendships. It is a much more effective means of downplaying doubts about one's sociability to formulate one's friends as having a range of traits or attributes. The term 'friend', after all, can encompass many types of individual from casual acquaintances through to 'best friends'. An illustrative example of this category concerns Student 2, who at this point in the interview has just been asked to define the concept of several negative feelings and emotions, beginning with loneliness. Immediately following her response to this question, the interviewer asks if she has been lonely since arriving at university.

### Extract 4.8 Student 2 (female, first year)

Int: ok (0.2) .h a:nd (0.2) would you say  
(0.4) you've been lonely since coming to  
university=

S2: =YEAH I think I definitely have (0.2) cos  
(0.2) I was quite close to my parents  
(0.2) before (0.4) I came here (.) and I  
had a (0.2) hu:ge group of mates↑ (0.6)

so >there were always someone to go out  
with< (.) and (0.2) °it takes a while to  
re-establish that°=

Int: mm

S2: °so yeah°

Int: (1.0) .hh and is this something that you  
(0.2) still feel now↑ (0.2) or::

S2: NOW AND AGAIN I THINK IF I'M (0.8) if  
I've not (0.6) been out doing anything  
for a while and I'd spent a bit of the  
day on my own I'll feel a bit lonely (.)  
but I know now (0.4) I've got mates in my  
flat (.) or mates in the flat above me I  
can just go round and chat to them [when-  
ever] I want to (.)=

Int: [mm]

S2: =°so it's better (1.2) so yeah°

S2's immediate response is an emphatic affirmation comprising 'YEAH I think I definitely have' (line 3). Her response is prosodically unusual relative to many of her peers in the interview data. Most students respond with pauses, often very long pauses as we can see in Extract 4.5 (above), and in a noticeably quieter volume to the surrounding stretches of talk. Affirmations or denials are often mitigated in some way, either topically to attend to interactional inferences, or sequentially to provide themselves with more time to formulate a more considered response. S2, however, embraces the question without any of these expected features, making her response marked. She draws an explicit connection between her experience of loneliness at university and her vibrant social circle back in her home town. Not only was she 'quite close to my parents' (lines 3–4), but she also had a 'huge group of mates' (lines 4–5) which meant that 'there was always someone to go out with' (line 5). The first comment to make concerns the variety of social support she was used to receiving at home, comprising both family members and friends. Secondly, her social circle is formulated as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986), whereby both the choice of the adjective 'huge' and the elongation of its vowel sound serve to communicate its

maximal qualities. This is further supplemented by a script formulation, whereby opportunities for social interaction were freely available, given that friends were 'always' around. Just one of these rhetorical devices is enough to suggest a particularly supportive friendship group, but combined in quick succession, they talk up a very nostalgic sense of her former social interactions, which is presented in stark contrast to her present circumstances, a situation she concedes will take 'a while to re-establish' (line 6).

The interviewer's following question attempts to elicit whether S2's feelings of loneliness have passed or whether they are still a present consideration at the point of the interview. She replies that the loneliness is contingent on her not having had social contact for a period of time (line 12), but she formulates knowledge that such a situation would easily be remedied given that she not only has 'mates in my flat' (line 13), but also 'mates in the flat above me' (line 14) whom she can draw upon for support. Thus, S2 works up a very diverse network of social contacts in her home city and then has begun to do the same in and around her university accommodation. And in addition to the presence of these various 'mates', she incorporates yet another script formulation whereby she can socialize with them in their flats 'whenever I want to' (line 15). The effect of these discursive choices is to render S2 as someone who is extremely well-connected, both at home and at university. Even though her loneliness is constructed as temporary and restricted to the initial feelings of separation she experienced when becoming acquainted with university life, she marshals an overwhelmingly extensive and supportive social network to avert any inference that she is personally implicated in the cause of her own loneliness.

In this next and final extract for one's networks as a social credential, we can observe a very similar pattern to the one found in Extract 4.7. The key difference, though, lies in what is at stake between the two extracts. For Student 2, the stakes were relatively minimal in that she had largely disavowed feelings of loneliness in the course of the interview, and where she had acknowledged its presence, it was confined to very specific periods of time ('a bit of the day on my own', line 12). As we will see now with Student 10, however, the stakes are much higher due to her having to account for an explicitly formulated deficit of friendships at university.

**Extract 4.9** Student 10 (female, first year)

Int: mm (0.6) are you happy with the number of friends you have at university

S10: (0.6) no

Int: why

S10: (2.0) I had (0.4) like the loveliest group of friends ever in sixth form but that was like (.) built up over years and years and years and it was like (0.4) .h it was like (0.2) a large group of people and we were all incredibly close↑=

Int: mm

S10: =and I kind of have the feeling like (.) I'm not gona get that lucky again↑

Int: mm

S10: and erm (1.0) yeah it's just (.) it's (0.6) strange (0.4) to kind of (0.4) be here and (0.2) and also I used to like reflect on things with my parents quite a lot (.) °like come and be like° (0.4) 'oh this happened at school today and whatever' =

Int: mm

S10: =and (.) I (.) kind of don't have that (2.0) tha- that like function any more↑ in my life (.) to be like (0.4) °to go up to someone and be like° (0.2) 'oh yeah this happened' (.) and then they'll (0.2) like ask questions and I'll actually reflect on what's (0.6) happened like (1.0) [yeah (0.2) >and I]=

Int: [and does it-]

S10: =feel like it's self-perpetuating I don't have people to talk to<=

Int: mm

- S10: =so I don't think about like (.)  
how (0.4) how to get people to talk to  
youf huh huh huh=  
Int: =mm (0.2) and does that bother you  
S10: (1.0) yeah I think so (0.2) I think I'm  
someone who's like (1.4) quite defined by  
(1.0) their impact on (.) °other people  
(.) and other people's impact on° (0.4)  
on me↑  
Int: mm  
S10: (2.0) tsk hhh huh huh huh ((*frustrated*  
*tone*)) I can't really put it into words  
Int: mm  
S10: (0.4) yeah

By the beginning of this extract, Student 10 has been discussing her experiences of loneliness for several minutes. The interviewer builds upon this by enquiring how she would evaluate the quantity of friendships that she has. With a very minimal pause, she responds categorically that 'no', she is not happy with the number. She proceeds into a very similar over-emphasized rendering of her former social situation, which comprised 'the loveliest group of friends ever in sixth form' (lines 5–6). Note the combination of the superlative form, the stress placed on that form, and the inclusion of the adverb 'ever' to mark its maximal qualities as an extreme case formulation. The positive acclamations continue in the next few lines where this group was 'built up over years and years and years', itself another extreme case formulation emphasizing the duration of time. We may infer from this the durability of such friendships which have formed over a seemingly long period of time. The quantity of the friendships is mentioned next, with similarly prosodic stress on the vowel sound for emphasis (line 7), followed by an assessment of them all being 'incredibly close' (line 8). The overall effect of these choices presents a deliberately idyllic image of the past, where social interactions were freely available with people who have been talked up as having the qualities of loveliness and closeness. There is potentially a correlation between a categorical response like in line 3, and the sheer amount of interactional work one subsequently has to perform in order

to preserve a sense of accountability for one's emotions. Such work is rendered here in an exaggerated, almost cartoonish, way. Having set up the deficit in line 3, and the superlative descriptions of her former social circle in lines 5–8, S10 now finds herself in the difficult discursive position of having to account for the discrepancy between the two circumstances. Until she does, she is rhetorically vulnerable to the question of why she finds herself so socially isolated now, given that she was seemingly extremely popular and socially integrated back in her home city.

S10 attempts to account for this discrepancy in her descriptions by attributing her positive social interactions to luck in lines 10–11. Doing so lowers her stake in forming and maintaining her older friendships, providing her with a present reason for why she has been so unsuccessful in forming social relationships so far at university. The sense of social interactions being outside of her control is formulated again later on in the transcript, where 'it's self-perpetuating I don't have people to talk to' (line 24). These descriptions present her as a bystander to her own situation: she recognizes the social deficit in her life, and the loneliness it is causing, but seems unable to do anything about it. She incorporates several instances of reported speech to highlight the contrast between the past and now. With her parents, she was formerly able to discuss the events of the school day with them (lines 14–16), a situation which she also capitalized on with friends (lines 19–21). On one level, the deployment of reported speech acts as proof of sociability. The very fact that she was having such conversations with friends and family members indexes a basic level of social interaction. On another level, the speech formulates her social deficit as being beyond her control, given that such a vital communicative 'function' (line 18) no longer exists for her: her interlocutors in the exchanges are no longer geographically present. Her concession in lines 26–27 that 'I don't think about like (.) how (0.4) how to get people to £talk to you£' seems designed to defend against a suggestion that she tries to instigate such a function once again. If she does not consider how to elicit mundane social interactions from her university peers, she cannot subsequently be held accountable for the absence of such interactions in her life. The responsibility for this problem then, and its contribution towards her feelings of loneliness, is devolved to the circumstances in which she finds herself.

In line 28, the interviewer attempts to elicit further comment from S10 about the absence of social interactions at university. After a one second pause, she provides an affirmation, before formulating herself as someone who is defined by, and defining of, other people (lines 29–31), and thus as someone emotionally dependent on reciprocal social interactions. The difficulty of having no one to talk to is therefore upgraded to an even more major concern for her, given that she presents it as a fundamental component of her identity. This is duly signalled by an affect display in the next line (33), where there is a prolonged and audible sigh of frustration. She brings her turn to a close by stating that ‘I can’t really put it into words’ (lines 33–34). As with the similar example mentioned in the previous paragraph, S10’s purported inability to verbalize the problem works rhetorically in her favour, as she cannot be held accountable for the inaction over her lack of social interactions if she has no way of acknowledging them.

As we have observed in this extract, the invocation of social credentials, and specifically of positive and varied social relationships, functions to ward off potential blame for one’s feelings of loneliness. They are intended as proof that the speaker is not socially incompetent, which would rule this out as a potential cause for feeling socially isolated. Not only this, they also function to bolster categorical denials of loneliness, given the subsequent rhetorical burdens such a response places on the speaker. Finally, we have observed how students incorporate both extreme case formulations and script formulations to emphasize the maximal qualities of their constructed friendships.

## Conclusion

The formulation of social credentials is a widespread discursive practice in the student disclosures of loneliness. A considerable amount of time is spent working up predispositions to acting socially, either within the course of everyday activities, or in the face of interactional constraints. Yet more time is devoted to the painting of nostalgic pictures of the past, whereby social groups and family members provide effective proof that one’s present state of loneliness is not one’s own fault.

It is interesting to note how agency is formulated differently across the two sub-categories. For social dispositions, one's personality traits and behaviours are a boon for combating the preconditions for loneliness. For social networks, agency is deflected away from the individual and onto the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Orientations to blame avoidance seem to be a central driving force beyond the deployment of these rhetorical features, as is the case for some of the features discussed in the other chapters of this book. What the students seem to be doing is discursively mystifying their circumstances, so that loneliness is not considered a personal problem, but one which is structurally and culturally bound. The language of loneliness, at least for these students, seems to be somewhat preoccupied with deferring responsibility for one's (in)actions. The tracking of agency throughout disclosures of loneliness is thus of prime analytical importance if we are to understand how people make sense of it, and how they organize their talk around it.

In the next chapter, we now turn our attention to the deployment of temporal contrasts within the student interviews. The construction of time is one which has received some attention in Discursive Psychology, and it constitutes a very rich rhetorical resource with which to negotiate a range of interactional concerns in talk-in-action.

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# 5

## Talking Up Temporal Contrasts

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on temporal narratives of loneliness, and how students work up dual identities for themselves at different points in time. The underlying premise to such a rhetorical device is that there the student is not the same person they once were, be it for better or for worse. This comprises another very common theme across the data, of interviewees invoking the fact that experiences of loneliness are temporally bound and that circumstances have not always been this way for them. Whilst the theme often works in tandem with the other theme of invoking social credentials, there is more to be said about how students specifically work up the passage of time and the implications they deploy to manage perceptions of loneliness, and thus it is deserving of its own chapter. There are two very broad patterns within this theme: students who construct feelings of loneliness as historic (and by implication, no longer affecting them), and students who construe such feelings as occupying their present reality in stark contrast to a more sociable past. The goals of this chapter, then, are to explore what durations of time are invoked when disclosing loneliness, what identities

students construct for themselves within those timeframes, and how they imply contrasts between the two points in time.

## Constructing Historic Loneliness

The first theme we shall turn to comprises the formulation of historic loneliness. In practice this encompasses the very many examples where students talked about a former period of their life in which they experienced social isolation. Examples range from feeling lonely for just one night, through to feeling lonely for several years or more in the past. There are several discursive patterns worth mentioning. The first year of one's degree programme is regularly cited as a time of tumultuous emotions and regular periods of social isolation. For some students the entire year is a source of social difficulty, whereas for others it is specifically Welcome Week ('Freshers' Week') at the beginning of an academic year. Finally, several students also talked up episodes of loneliness at school or college, prior to their arrival at university. We turn first of all to the most frequent of the three patterns: the construal of first year as site of loneliness.

## Locating the Lonely Self Within First Year

For almost all students, arriving at university marks a transitional time in their emotional as well as academic development. It is well-documented that negative feelings including anxiety, depression and loneliness are a common occurrence in when living for the first time with a group of unfamiliar peers, in an unfamiliar city and in an unfamiliar working environment. It is perhaps little wonder then, that almost all of the students who spoke about the past did so in relation to their first year of study, when their ability to cope with such new challenges would have been initially tested. All of the examples within this category speak of first year as a whole rather than as an specific week here, or an individual evening there. The first extract comes from the middle of the interview with Student 19. She is a final year student

reflecting here on a question about whether she has experienced loneliness during her time at university so far.

**Extract 5.1** Student 19 (female, final year)

Int: mhm and would you say you've (0.4) experienced loneliness since coming to university↑

S19: ye:ah (1.0) yeah (.) in first year I'd say so for definite yeah (0.8) cos I was (0.4) when you're (0.2) put into uni and then er:m (0.6) I was in <student halls> (0.6) so there was like all these people that I didn't know (unclear) especially if (unclear) >like no you don't get along with them< but like you don't really::=-

Int: =gel

S19: ye:ah (0.4) so it was like that (.) but obviously like I had my housemates (0.2) but we weren't in the same ha:lls↑ so I didn't really get to see them as often as I'd liked↑ (0.4) so I just sort of was in my room a lot↓

Int: mm↓ (0.6) and how did you feel being in your room (0.4) a lot

S19: er::↑ (.) it was alright↑ I busied myself

In response to the interviewer's question, S19 affirms her response twice. The elongation of the vowel in 'ye:ah' (line 3) and the pause suggest she is withholding full agreement, but the repetition of 'yeah' then confirms her response. She then immediately invokes 'first year' in its entirety as correlating with such feelings. Her answer is framed as 'for definite' (line 3), which construes the first year not only as an appropriate response to the initial question, but also as one which is highly resonant with the elicited topic. Her temporal demarcation of 'first year' with experiences of loneliness also implicitly discounts its presence in the other years in which she has been at university, though of course

this can only be a provisional observation, one which is subject to potential revision later on in the interview (it later transpires that first year was apparently her only experience of loneliness).

Her footing shift in line 4, from 'cos I was...' to 'when you're...' highlights her orientation to such experiences as indicative of many people's, rather than just herself. The switch also comprises a script formulation, whereby being allocated student dormitories is presented as a typical and routine component of one's induction in university. The choice of the words 'put into uni' (line 4) is hearable as being put into university accommodation, with the removal of the student's agency and decision-making being made explicit. This begins to lay the discursive groundwork for the onset of loneliness and is something she returns to later in her response. She talks up the unfamiliarity of her co-habitants in lines 5–6, when she describes them as 'all these people that I didn't know'. There are a few points of temporal interest to mention here. Firstly, at the point of the interview S19 has been at university for almost three years and thus has likely met many people over the course of that time, not least the initial flatmates she shared her accommodation with in first year. Her choice to construe them with a generic noun phrase 'people' is already unfavourable to a degree given that she is likely to be familiar with at least some of their names. This is compounded by the choice of the pre-modification 'all these', suggesting that she is emphasizing still further the genericization (van Leeuwen 2008) of the people who occupied the same living and social spaces as her. Not only this, these were people whom she 'didn't know' (line 6), with a particular emphasis to demonstrate her lack of connection with them. On the one hand, these aspects are being described in such a way as to make loneliness seem all but inevitable, but on the other this state of affairs is suggested to last for the entire year. The result is a foregrounding of the seemingly perpetual unknowingness of her peers, which serves to obscure her own agency in contributing to this situation.

This presents a possible interactional dilemma for S19. Not knowing one's neighbours when moving into a new property is to be expected, but to still not know them after almost a year is likely to invite comment. It is to this concern that she orients her next few lines proffering

the contingency that one may not get along with one's neighbours (lines 6–7), which she and the interviewer then co-operatively downgrade to not sharing similar interests with them (lines 7–8), to not 'gel[ling]'. Here the interviewer makes himself complicit in the deferral of the student's agency for her loneliness via his affiliative completion of her sentence. S19 confirms the affiliative response by stating 'ye:ah (0.4) so it was like that' in line 9. She then implies that her current final year housemates were a source of social interaction for her in first year. The lack of attention to temporal detail here allows for the assumption to form that she met and socialized with her housemates for the majority of first year, thus highlighting that her loneliness was not all-encompassing and that she was at least in part socially active. This is very telling, as in fact she reveals much later on in the interview that she did not foster friendships with them until the very end of her first year. Thus even though she 'obviously' was in a position to have 'had' companions, the exact timing of such blossoming friendships is omitted, something which works in her favour regarding the presentation of herself as a sociable being following a disclosure of loneliness.

There are several further references to time in the moments after this. She bemoans that she did not 'get to see them as often as I'd like' (line 11), implying her social interactions with them were relatively infrequent. The verb string 'get to see' functions as a modalized dynamic proposition, proffering an (in)ability to perform an action, which in this case comprises taking part in social time with her friends. She then construes this as resulting in her being 'in my room a lot' (line 12). Again the temporal references do not have discrete boundaries, so it is difficult to gauge the proportion of time she spent alone in her room compared to socializing with her peers. Whether the temporal ambiguity was an intentional discursive device or not, it does provide her with the interactional 'wiggle' room to work up her social interactions as she sees fit, and to modulate downwards the perceptions of her time spent alone. The interviewer's subsequent question then invites her to evaluate her feelings at being her room 'a lot', to which she replies 'it was alright' (line 14). Relative to her surrounding talk, this assessment is minimalistic in its delivery, and non-committal in that she refuses to be drawn on either a positive or negative evaluation of this alone time. Such brief

responses tend to signal that an adjacency pair has been adequately completed and that the speaker has little more to say on the matter.

This extract is interesting on two levels. Firstly, because S19 locates her loneliness discretely within the boundaries of her first year of study, thus implying that she no longer feels lonely. And secondly, her deployment of ambiguous time references allows her to imply having had more social interactions than she may have had, and fewer episodes of time spent alone in her university accommodation. Her loneliness is thus ‘designedly ambiguous’ or *defeasible* (Stokoe 2012: 282), which means that a speaker leaves themselves enough semantic room to deny or reformulate a proposition should it subsequently be challenged in some way. The deployment of time references is not exclusively reserved for talking up one’s sociability, however. It can also be used to formulate a sense of being ‘out of synch’ with one’s peers. In the next extract, Student 25 discloses a sequence of events which recurred numerous times throughout her first year, and which ultimately caused her to feel socially isolated.

### Extract 5.2 Student 25 (female, second year)

Int: and would you say you::’ve (0.6) been  
lonely since coming to university↓

S25: er:::m (1.4) in first year↓ (0.4) at  
one point↓ (0.6) er:m↑ (1.0) >it was a  
really weird situation< because (0.2)  
all my friends that I’ve met in:: halls  
(.) >university halls< (0.2) were into a  
very different sort of music (.) so they  
were into like RnB (.) and I was (0.4) so  
like (.) when we would go out they would  
go into the RnB room and £I would- (0.2)  
wouldn’t wana be there£

Int: mm

S25: (1.0) erm↓ (1.0) so it was a <weird>  
(0.6) situation because I felt lonely  
(.) but I had all these people around me  
(0.8) but I didn’t wana be:: (0.4) with

them↑ (.) >sort of thing↑< er::m yeah  
 (0.4) I think that's (.) °the loneliest  
 I've felt°

Int: mm↓ (0.6) and was that like a one off↑ (.)  
 or did it happen several [times?

S25: [no it happened several tim::es (0.4)  
 er::m (.) so I:: (0.6) would go out  
 with them and enjoy- (.) >°well kind of  
 enjoy°< pre's (0.6) YEAH because it's all  
 to do with music↑

[some lines omitted]

S25: it's a weird situation when (2.0) you  
 feel lonely because of music

Int: mmm↑

S25: cos they were into different music than I  
 was so::: (1.0) I couldn't really relate  
 to them (0.8) that well (.) erm (0.6) but  
 then I got closer with [friend's name]  
 on my course (0.8) so started going out  
 with them (.) felt a lot better °about  
 myself (1.0) but yeah (0.2) there was  
 some times (.) when° fI huh huh left the  
 clubf because I just wasn't having a good  
 time with them

Int: mm (0.8) you left it by yourself you  
 mean↓=

S25: =yeah just cos (0.2) I wasn't having  
 (0.6) a good time (.) but that's just  
 all down to music (.) cos I like↑ them as  
 people (0.6) >but if I don't like listen-  
 ing to that music in there< (.) in that  
 room (.) for the whole night (.) I'm not  
 having a good time (0.8) so I'd rather  
 leave (1.0) but that would then °not make  
 me feel very good if that° kinda makes  
 sense↑

Just as with the previous student, S25 invokes first year as the source for her feelings of loneliness at university thus far. She formulates a sequence of events happening ‘at one point’ (line 3) whereby her friends’ different musical tastes ultimately meant she felt excluded from socializing with them in a nightclub. She describes it as ‘a really weird situation’, formulating the incidence of being socially asynchronous with one’s whole social circle on a night out as culturally unusual and unexpected. It is interesting to note that this issue is described as pertaining to ‘all my friends that I’ve met in:: halls’ (lines 4–5), thus stipulating that there were no alternative social interactions to be had. Loneliness is thus presented as the inevitable outcome of this sequence of events. She defends herself against the possibility that she was being unsociable by emphasizing how ‘very different’ the music was to her own tastes. This comment talks up her seeming inability to accommodate this kind of music, presenting it as something she would never otherwise engage with. She begins to state her own musical preferences in line 6, before changing the focus back to the friends’ decision to go into the R&B (Rhythm and Blues) themed part of the social venue.

She once again deploys the adjective ‘<weird>’ (line 10) and places emphasis on it by drawing out the vowel sound. The weirdness is ascribed to the mismatch of having ‘all these people around me’ but not wanting to be with them, before summarizing this experience in a very quiet volume as “the loneliest I’ve felt” in line 13. Such decreases in volume are very common at the point students disclose loneliness within the interviews. Despite S25 having previously labelled this as a single occurrence, the interviewer asks her to confirm the veracity of this with his question in lines 14–15. He does so because of the script formulation in ‘when we would go out’ (line 7), which suggests that this happened on at least several occasions. She immediately confirms that it did indeed happen several times. She formulates a cognition of enjoyment in line 17, which she quickly downgrades to ‘well kind of enjoy’. She seems to be attending again to accountability, given that she had been enjoying herself before their arrival at the nightclub, then her unwillingness to join them would have seemed more unsociable on her part. The downgrading of her assessment in the pre-drinking (‘pre’s’) mitigates her subsequent investment in having to humour her friend’s

different tastes. Following this there is a very short interlude whereby S25 has to explain to the interviewer what 'pre's' is: it is a cultural practice of getting intoxicated with friends prior to going out and socializing in the evening.

She reaffirms the loneliness as being 'all to do with music' (line 18), thus presenting her feelings as being contingent on just one social issue, and as being restricted periods of time where music forms part of the social interaction. She assesses it again, for a third time, as a 'weird situation', which by now has maximized the sense of these social interactions not conforming to expectations or cultural norms. The assumption is that when one socializes in the evening with friends, one then stays with those friends for the duration of the evening. The weirdness of the situation is marshalled to account for the fact that she 'couldn't really relate to them' (lines 22–23). Here she is drawing attention to a frustrated ability to share in their interests, thus formulating herself as someone who has tried to be sociable in the first instance. This unsatisfactory situation is then temporally contrasted with S25 'then' becoming closer with a friend on her degree programme. The two propositions either side of the temporal marker highlight firstly her frustrated ability to be social, followed by her confirmed sociability at interacting with other peers and getting to know them. There are two points to make about this discursive device. Firstly, a considerable amount of time has been spent thus far on talking up the apparent unsatisfactoriness (for S25) of the social events she has participated in. This is done to mitigate as much as possible the perception she is an unsociable person and ungrateful for the social interactions she has had with her peers. In other words, if the situation is as objectively bad as she is describing, this makes her less accountable for her subsequent decisions to disengage from the group on several occasions.

Secondly, however, this presents her with an interactional dilemma. Having made an effort to emphasize her inability to engage with her friends over the issue of musical taste, she leaves herself vulnerable to the perception that her loneliness is self-imposed and thus justified. The temporal adverb 'then' signals to the interviewer that her circumstances have changed in the here and now of the interview. Thus the contrast she deploys is one of having gotten to know a new friend on her course,

and that she started 'going out with them' (lines 24–25), referring to the social circle around her new companion. This makes explicit her capacity to form new friendships, and to engage more successfully in social interactions with them on nights out. She attends to the emotional impact it had on her, whereby she 'felt a lot better 'about myself' (line 25). This sets up an oppositional identity construct. She formulates her prior self as someone who did not positively self-evaluate, reflectively locating the source of unhappiness within herself due to an incapacity to cope, rather than in the circumstances around her. There is a subtle implication here that she was partially complicit in her own social isolation in that she didn't resolve the situation with friends, but instead continued to leave social functions earlier than is conventional.

In the following segment she returns to the existence of 'some times' (line 26) in which she left various clubs, again framing the problem as a routine opportunity for social exclusion. The interviewer then elicits whether she left the group by herself or with others, and S25 confirms this. She then offers up a mental preference for her friends in spite of her routinely leaving them in social encounters, where she states that 'I like them<sup>↑</sup> as people' (line 30). Saying this defends her against the accusation that she had a minimal investment in her social relationships anyway, which would account for her willingness to leave social engagements early on a number of occasions. She closes this perception down by making explicit her positive assessments of them 'as people', which is hearable as liking their personalities, thus drawing attention to the differences in musical tastes as the source of the problem rather than her own stake in the friendships. She sets up a conditional-statement proposition whereby not liking a particular type of music discounts her ability to have 'a good time'. Her statement that she would 'rather leave' is thus presented as cognitively and socially logical. S25 thus performs a good level of social awareness and works up the direness of the circumstances as very significant, in order to warrant a change in friendships over time.

As we have seen then with this example, a temporal contrast is at the heart of Student 25's accounts of her loneliness. Significantly less emphasis is placed on the subsequent situation, though much of her present feelings are implied oppositionally from the negative descriptions of former social interactions. In other words, the repeated and

emphasized emotional turmoil outlined in the nightclub scenarios serves to present her current social relations as much improved. Her initial description of the problem rendered it as a single instance (line 3), but over the course of the interview this becomes apparent as representative of many such encounters for her. This leaves us with the question of why S25 would initially formulate it as an isolated incident, before subsequently talking up the frequency with which it happened in first year. The concept of *defeasibility* discussed beforehand could provide a solution, given that any disclosure which could potentially problematize a speaker is revealed first in very guarded terms. Had Student 25 responded by emphasizing the regularity in which she left social interactions prematurely, this would have cast her in an unfavourable light, especially as all of the preparational interactional groundwork had not yet been laid. Rhetorically it is thus much 'safer' for her to disclose one instance of social trouble which she can then use to gauge the reaction of her interlocutor. After this she is then in a much stronger position to reveal the frequency with which this problem occurred.

Having now discussed the interactional functions of temporal ambiguity in the first extract, and of modulating the apparent frequency with which loneliness-inducing events occur in the second, we turn now to one final extract within this sub-category of contrasting the first year of university with the present day. In the following example, Student 7 discloses for the first time that even though she is in her first year of her degree programme, she is in fact in her second year of study. She thus draws upon the same pattern of invoking a negative temporal contrast with her first year, despite currently being in 'first year' at the time of the interview.

### Extract 5.3 Student 7 (female, first year)

- Int: .hh and (0.2) on the other side of the coin (0.2) could you describe your unhappiest moment at university to date
- S7: (1.0) err (1.0) °yeah° (0.6) err (0.2) to give a bit of backstory (.) I actually

started university last year (.) doing a different course=

Int: mhm

S7: =so I started doing psychology (0.4) a:nd I did it (0.4) til (0.2) Christmas (0.2) and then (.) decided I wanted to change course .hh (0.6) a:n (0.2) cos basically I really hated (0.2) my course (0.2) like (0.4)

Int: how come↑ (0.6) was it not not [really what you expected or:]

S7: [it just wasn't right for me heh heh] yeah (0.2) just didn't enjoy it at all (0.2) and I didn't like the flat I was living in (.) I didn't get on with my flatmates (0.2) I felt quite lonely (0.4) a lot of the time (0.2) so: (0.6) my unhappiest moment was probably (0.4) just before I left university (0.4) I: (2.2) I can't (.) remember exactly what happened but↑ (0.2) I just (0.4) everything sort of built up and I got really upset I can remember like (0.2) face-timing my parents (0.4)=

Int: °mm°

S7: =and crying about (0.4) like (0.4) everything was going wrong=

Int: mm

S7: =and they came and got me from uni and took me home °and then I didn't come back funtil this yearf°=

Int: mm

S7: =.hh so that was probably my worst moment

The interviewer begins by asking a question about her least happy moment at university, which S7 uses as an opportunity to disclose having begun a different course. She signals the beginning of the narrative with an abstract (Labov and Waletzky 1967) 'to give a bit of backstory'

in line 3. This serves to locate the narrative within a prior time, rather than in the present. She describes having initially started a psychology degree and undertaking one semester of study, before construing herself as having changed her mind. She accounts for this with a bold assessment of her having ‘really hated (0.2) my course’ (line 8). The strong dispreference seems formulated for the benefit of her interlocutor (a university lecturer), whereby abandoning one’s degree could otherwise be construed as indicating a lack of commitment or interest in studying. The interviewer’s question ‘how come↑’ in line 10 inadvertently reopens this delicate issue of S7 having to account for her previous actions. It is interesting that she responds this time in a different way, swapping her previous subject-side assessment of *hating* for an object-side assessment (Edwards and Potter 2017) in ‘it just wasn’t right for me’, locating her decision in a misalignment between the course and her expectations of it. This carries considerably less interactional risk than reaffirming her lack of enjoyment, given the potential perception for this to persist with her new degree.

Having set the scene of a degree she did not enjoy, she then introduces yet further grounds to warrant her change of studies, comprising a flat she did not enjoy living in, and flatmates she did not get along with (lines 12–13). As with the previous student example, we can observe here a compounding of the former state of events in order to establish her situation as emotionally and socially untenable. She explicitly describes herself as feeling lonely ‘a lot of the time’, which given the list of constraints she has just introduced, is presented as wholly expected and justifiable in the circumstances. She therefore initially reformulates the interviewer’s initial question focus about a specific unhappy ‘moment’ as an ongoing situation comprising numerous episodes of loneliness. Subsequently she isolates one of those episodes which she locates at ‘just before I left university’ in line 15. She invokes a lack of recall (line 16) as interfering with her ability to recount the onset of such feelings. As Edwards and Potter (1992) point out, the power of recall can be a powerful discursive tool for accounting for one’s actions. The lack of recall here obscures the possibility of whether she could (and should) have acted sooner, and thus averted the crisis point she describes herself as reaching in line 17. The ergative construction in ‘everything

sort of built up' is construed as furnishing her with little agency, thus presenting her capacity to intervene on her own behalf as severely constrained. The result of all of this is S7 becoming upset, and deploying another recall device in the remembering of phoning her parents for support. It is interesting to note the level of recall at the point of crisis compared to that of the build up to it. For example she recounts both her emotional state ('crying') and the substance of what was said in the Skype call between herself and her parents ('everything was going wrong'), whereas the same level of detail is not provided for the events leading up to making this call. Her parents subsequently arrive and bring her home, where she then did not come back until 'this year'. This entire episode is then reaffirmed as her 'worst moment' (line 25).

The effect of these discursive choices is to present S7 as not in control of her own circumstances. Specifically the unfolding of time prior to her leaving university is obscured, which stands in contrast to the much clearer chronology of what happened from when she called her parents. A lack of factual recall is implicated within the temporal contrast, lowering her stake in her feelings of loneliness and her ability to circumvent a withdrawal from her degree programme. In a subsequent part of the interview not shown here, she affirms her present contentment with her new degree, thus emphasizing the contrast between then and now.

## Locating the Lonely Self Within Welcome Week

As we have seen in the previous section the entirety of first year, and all of the uncertainties it is meant to represent, is often used to imply a less lonely self in the present. For some other students, however, the issue is constructed as being restricted to one very limited period within first year, namely Welcome or 'Fresher's' Week. There is considerably less at stake for students invoking loneliness within their first week, as it may legitimately be seen more as a natural reaction to a change of circumstances than to having had a year in which to do something about it. Some students talk about Welcome Week in tandem with their first week of teaching, as we can see in the extract below where Student 13 reflects on feelings of isolation in her first lectures.

## Extract 5.4 Student 13 (female, first year)

Int: mm (0.2) and have you had any lonely moments: (1.4) on campus (0.2) >as- as in at university I mean (.) not necessarily on campus< but (0.4) huh=

S13: =erm↑ (0.2) yeah I think probably the first week (0.6) (unclear) especially (0.2) first sort of lectures and seminars I went to were quite lonely because (0.4) I didn't know anyone from my accommodation that °was in (there) doing the same subject as me:°=

Int: mm

S13: =and so (.) I'd walk to uni by myself (.) and I'd usually (0.4) I wouldn't sit by myself (.) I'd sit with someone (0.2) but (0.6) didn't necessarily know that person

Int: mm

S13: erm (1.6) yeah↓ (0.6) I'd say (.) probably during the first week °just because I was getting to know people° and quite often (1.0) I'd go back and sit in my room (.) on my own instead of sit- (.) sitting with (2.0) other people

Int: mhm↑

The interviewer asks S13 if she has ever experienced loneliness, though he quickly rephrases the question given that the original formulation unnecessarily restricted such feelings to being physically on campus (and thus not in her university accommodation, e.g.). She posits the first week of being at university as comprising a lonely moment, which she then combines with the 'first sort of lectures and seminars I went to' (line 5). She accounts for such feelings by stating that none of her flatmates were doing her degree programme, and therefore she knew no one going into those first classes. This results in her providing several script formulations of walking to university by herself, sitting next to

peers whom she did not know, and then returning to her accommodation to sit in her room by herself (lines 9–15). These descriptions work up the routine nature of her lack of interaction in those first days of university, whereby the causes for her solitude are represented as comprising external factors (not knowing anyone at the beginning) and internal factors (her initial preference for sitting in her room compared to interacting with her housemates).

S13 accounts for this limited period of loneliness by reasoning that ‘I was just getting to know people’ (line 14), highlighting her actions as occurring at the start of a process of socialization, and thus one in which opportunities to form friendships had not yet been realized. And because of this early stage of socialization, she would ‘quite often’ (line 14) return home alone and spend time in her room. The forthright disclosure of one’s agency in relation to numerous episodes without any social interaction seems only possible in the context of new circumstances, given that there is a readily available reason for it. It is interesting, therefore, to contrast this with the extracts which represent loneliness as occurring throughout the entirety of first year, where the students’ agency is downplayed or obscured. Another extract which focuses specifically on the difficulties presented by Welcome Week comprises the interview with Student 10. At this point in the interview she has disclosed feelings of loneliness immediately prior to the question stated here. The interviewer alludes to this in the structure of his question, thus deferring the perception that he is needlessly repeating himself. He elicits whether her unhappiest moment is indeed connected to the feelings she has only just mentioned, and she affirms this to be the case.

### Extract 5.5 Student 10 (female, first year)

Int: I mean you’ve kind of answered my next question as well >cos I was gona ask< about the (0.4) unhappiest moment=

S10: mm

Int: =at university (0.2) is it connected to the sam::e

S10: (1.6) ye:ah (0.6) I guess so (0.4) er:m  
 (0.4) Fresher's Week was kind of (0.2)  
 like I (°didn't°) (0.6) I didn't really  
 get on with my flatmates and .h (0.4) erm  
 (0.2) and things like that and I was very  
 homesick (.) and then also like .hh (0.6)  
 erm I haven't been to visit my family at  
 all and I used to be really really close  
 to my little sister↑=

Int: °mm°

S10: =so we're like (.) we Skype occasionally  
 but=

Int: =it is quite a long way though (0.4) from  
 [city] to [city]=

S10: yeah

Int: =in your defence ((*playful tone*))

S10: huh huh huh huh

Int: so: (0.2) your unhappiest moment (0.2) if  
 you had to summarise it (.) it would be::

S10: er:m (0.2) probably (1.2) the (0.4) sec-  
 ond night of university (0.4) like (.)  
 being in and knowing that other people  
 were out=

Int: mm

S10: =and like .hh (0.4) erm (0.6) like my  
 family would (0.2) were out (0.2) like at  
 home so I couldn't Skype (.) and I didn't  
 really have anyone to confide in↑=

Int: mm

S10: =I think I'm quite like (0.4) I confide  
 in people a lot and that makes me feel  
 better

S10 begins to provide an assessment of Fresher's Week before refocusing on her apparent incompatibility with the peers she was assigned to live with (lines 6–7). She mitigates this by saying she 'didn't really get on' with them, thus lowering her stake in negatively evaluating them and deflecting the suspicion that she may be implicated in the discord. She

also offers her homesickness as a valid cause for her loneliness, and she upgrades the rhetorical force of it by emphasizing not having seen them. This is problematized still further by formulating a repetition of how 'really really close' (lines 9–10) she was with her younger sister, thus making relevant the absence of familial contact as hearably troubling for her. She demonstrates evidence that she maintains contact with them via Skype, highlighting that she is being proactive in maintaining such interactions and warding off her feelings of isolation. The interviewer offers an affiliative response in line 13, co-working to vouch for acceptableness for not having visited her family given her geographically distant they are from her. He then prompts her to refocus on the question and summarize her unhappiest moment, at which point she offers up 'the second night of university' (line 19) specifically. She formulates this historic episode as particularly problematic because all avenues for social interaction were seemingly exhausted. She states that 'people were out' in line 20, though she does not mention which people she is referring to. In previous segments of the interview, she mentions that at the point of the interview she has had difficulties in finding like-minded people to form friendships with. Thus the 'people' seem to refer to her flatmates and potentially her peers more generally. In this, she draws attention to her normatively anomalous action of being the only person not socializing, and this constituting a degree of distress for her. To compound the problem, her family were also worked up as unavailable for interaction on this particular night, rendering her isolation apparently complete.

In the final part of her response to this question, she describes herself as someone who confides in others, and that this forms an integral component of her ability to stave off feelings of loneliness (lines 26–27). She introduces a dispositional formulation of preferring to 'confide in people a lot', which highlights her preference for personal disclosures over social conversations when she is feeling unhappy. Overall in this extract, then, S10 not only works to frame Welcome Week as problematic for her given that her usual avenues for social contact were unavailable, she also locates particular instances of social isolation in her preference to stay in when seemingly all of her peers are out socializing. The problems are construed as temporally restricted, though are presented as having the opportunity to make her feel lonely again if both her peers and

her family are unable to speak to her in future. The main distinction between the two points in time focuses around her family orientation, who are now unable to provide her with the ready opportunities for reflection and disclosure she has been used to. S10 thus talks up her difficulties in adapting to university life quickly and thus impacting her feelings and emotions negatively.

## Locating the Lonely Self Prior to University

In this third subset of examples, students describe how the origins of their loneliness sometimes derives even further back in time to their school or college days. Unlike the other categories discussed so far in this chapter, which largely work to imply present sociability by invoking past loneliness, the following extracts convey loneliness as a feature of both time periods. The distinction revolves around a mitigation of the underlying feelings of loneliness they have known for many years, and thus formulates themselves as coping well at this point in time for the benefit of the interviewer. References to one's school or college days do not convey their loneliness as historic in the sense that it is a curiosity of the past, but rather it is presented as a current concern with an established chronology of social difficulty for the speakers. One example of this comprises the interview with Student 1, who at this point in the interview has discussed his feelings of loneliness at length. Having disclosed his frequent and temporally persistent lonely feelings unprompted, the interviewer then questions S1 on whether he would evaluate himself as an inherently lonely person.

### Extract 5.6 Student 1 (male, first year)

Int: .hhh would you consider yourself a↑ (0.2)  
lonely person  
 S1: (2.0) °I used to be (.) but not any more°  
 Int: (2.0) .h ok↓ .h (.) what do you under-  
 stand loneliness to be

S1: .h erm↑ (2.0) °someone who (0.2) isn't comfortable (0.4) in their own company (0.4) and (0.2) needs (.) the company of others (.) and (.) doesn't (0.2) get it (1.0) I guess°  
[and (unclear)] sp- (.) spends a lot of time on their own=

Int: [doesn't get it ((clarificatory tone))]

S1: =and isn't comfortable with it

Int: mhm↑

S1: °that's that's what I understand loneliness to be (0.2) really (0.2) [#I think] anyone who spends a certain amount of time=

Int: [ok]

S1: =on their own (0.2) starts to feel uncomfortable with it (1.0) but (0.4) some people are more prone to feeling lonely than others#°

Int: mm (0.4) such as::↑

S1: °I dunno° (0.6) yeah (0.2) m- m- m:- me ten years ago and me now huh .huh huh .huh huh .huh (0.2) £I used to (.) yeah I used to (have)£ (.) lot of difficulty in being on my own jus- cuz (0.2) I didn't know what to do with myself [.hh] (0.4) and=

Int: [mm]

S1: =now (0.6) I'm (0.4) a bit more comfortable in my own skin (0.2) so I can (0.2) I can (0.2) occ- occupy myself more easily (.) I think that comes (0.2) just generally growing up

After a delay on two seconds, S1 responds that he would accept that assessment, but only in relation to his former self. He thus immediately sets up a temporal contrast, though one which leaves open inferences which need to be resolved. For example, if he would not class himself

as a lonely person now, how can he account for the frequent feelings of social isolation he discloses in several of his previous turns? Also an open question is what prompted the change in feelings between the former and present selves. The interviewer does not immediately orient to these questions, but instead elicits S1's understanding of the term he is using (line 3). As we have seen in a previous chapter, loneliness is a concept which has had numerous definitions in the past literature, and thus the interviewer is working to gauge how the student himself means this term. S1 describes such a 'lonely person', that is someone who is dispositionally lonely, as someone who requires the social presence of others and for whom alone time is an ordeal to be borne. The hypothetical person is construed as someone for whom loneliness is somewhat inevitable despite a desire to be around others.

Initially S1 does not make explicit the connection between the typical features of a 'lonely person' and his former self. It is only when the interviewer prompts him for an example in line 16 does he actually do this. He frames it as a feature of his self from ten years ago, which would have placed him approximately at primary school age, though later on in the interview (not shown here) the episodes he describes all in fact occur during his time at secondary school. Now that the connection has been made explicit, his terms of reference have also changed accordingly. He no longer describes it as 'someone who (0.2) isn't comfortable...' (line 4), as 'anyone who spends a certain amount of time...' (line 12), or as 'some people are...' (line 15), but instead now uses the first person pronoun as in the example 'I didn't know what to do with myself' (lines 19–20). He talks of his former loneliness as something which was very difficult to control, with the difficulty residing in being unsure what to do with the time he spent by himself. The admission is delivered throughout with a whole series of pauses, short bursts of nervous laughter, and a low volume in comparison to the surrounding stretches of talk.

The contrast with the present day is signalled with the temporal adverb 'now' in line 22. He formulates his current self as being 'a bit more comfortable in my own skin', an idiomatic phrase which denotes an acceptance of one's feelings and especially one's perceived flaws in relation to something, which in this case comprises norms around

sociability. He deploys a dynamic modal verb ‘can’ to indicate his new-found ability to ‘occupy myself more easily’. Interestingly he does not orient himself towards the pursuit of social interactions to combat his feelings of loneliness. Instead he talks up his ability to cope with the alone time he inevitably has, thus formulating himself as both remedy and potential problem for feelings of social isolation. He posits acceptance of loneliness as a feature of ‘growing up’ (line 24), and thus as a natural default state of being which requires mastery rather than social interaction.

For Student 1, temporal contrasts with a lonelier self in school days are a way of working up a present self which is in control of one’s own negative feelings. He lowers his stake in his loneliness by presenting it as natural, inevitable and a trait to be accepted rather than overcome. In this, S1 is unique in the student interviews, given that he presents loneliness itself as a disposition over which he has limited, if any, control. Most of the other students construe loneliness as a by-product linked to several different scenarios; being away from home for the first time, having other dispositions which exacerbate social deficits, not having enough money to socialize, and so on. Another example of how students discuss the origins of their loneliness prior to university comprises the case of Student 20. At this point in the interview, she has spoken of her familiarity with feelings of depression and isolation, and she is about to recount at length a narrative of how she came to be lonely, in response to the interviewer’s question about instances of loneliness. The extract is unusually lengthy and covers several distinct periods in time, but it is well worth close consideration. It shall therefore be broken down into two segments in order to make the analysis of it more manageable.

#### Extract 5.7a Student 20 (female, second year)

Int: °and° (.) could you talk me through one  
of those instances where you felt lonely  
S20: (1.0) mmm (1.0) ye::ah ((bracing voice))  
(0.5) so::↑ (2.0) it’s hard to pinpoint  
one↑ (1.6) I think (1.0) erm:: (2.0) I

was home schooled until I was twelve (1.0) erm (1.0) that was for like practical reasons that my parents moved from [country] and had to travel back there↑ (.) so they would have had to=

Int: [mm]

S20: =take me in an- out of schools (0.4) a lot (0.4) erm: (1.0) and also in [country] it's just more normal (.) to home school (.) so it's not really a thing↑

Int: [oh really↑ (0.6) I didn't know that]

S20: it's more common↑ (.) so it's less like frowned upon slash (0.6) questioned (0.8) it's just like (0.6) >oh yeah we home school< (.) whereas in the UK people (.) have asked me even if it's legal↑ (0.6) and things like that (0.6) so I grew up in that sort of environment (0.6) and my mom did her very best (1.0) but obviously (0.6) her very best kind of fell short↑ (.) cos she's not (1.0) educated to the level that (1.0) she doesn't have a degree (1.6) so=

Int: mm

S20: =that was really challenging I basically like self-educated (0.6) so (.) >sorry not twelve fourteen< (1.6) so I started school for my GCSEs (1.0) erm (1.0) and like (0.5) for two years (0.6) I was just <incredibly> (.) incredibly lonely↑ and depressed and I:: (0.6) basically like (1.6) got to the point of attempting suicide (0.6) because I just (1.0) felt so completely isolated and alone

Int: mm

S20: erm (0.6) because nobody understood me:: (0.6) nobody understood (.) like (.) the contrast (.) that I was going through↑

(0.6) erm (0.6) an- it wasn't even that  
 (.) a lot (.) I used to feel guilty cos  
 I thought a lot of people have been bul-  
 lied↑ (0.6) and that's why they're: (0.6)  
 obviously suicidal or depressed like  
 they got treated horribly (.) their par-  
 ents abused them (.) like (0.6) who do I  
 feel like this when I've never been (1.0)  
 abused by my parents (.) I've never like  
 (0.6) been horribly bullied at school  
 (0.6) I think it was just (1.0) feeling  
 like (0.6) literally nobody was in the  
 same boat as me↑ (.) and=

Int: mm

S20: =understood that series of (1.0) erm  
 (1.6) I du- (.) I dunno (.) like (1.6)  
 yeah (.) those experiences (0.6) erm (.)  
 so I think I just felt really lonely  
 for like two years an- I (0.6) I only  
 knew like (.) one girl in my year when  
 I started (0.6) and she was in like the  
popular group↑ so I would <stand> with  
 them (0.6) but just feel like (2.0) I  
 just didn't know how to interact with any  
 of them

Int: mmmm

Student 20 pauses several times before responding, and her account is preceded by what has been described as a '((bracing voice))', which means her delivery of 'ye::ah' (line 3) is hearable to the interviewer as conveying some trepidation. The beginning of her account is filled with numerous long pauses of over a second in length, something which further suggests the delicate nature of what is about to be disclosed. She responds that she is unable to 'pinpoint' a single instance, which suggests her feelings of loneliness have comprised an ongoing concern for her over a discernible period of time. She begins her narrative by stating that she was homeschooled until she was twelve years old, though

later she corrects herself and states that she was fourteen (line 22). She constructs this as borne of necessity due to her family moving back and forth between the UK and her country of birth. This implicitly conveys that her options for social interaction with peers were severely limited, something which makes explicit in the next utterance when she describes being taken in and out of schools many times. Blame is assigned to the limitations of the situation, rather than to any individuals such as her parents, via the dynamic modal 'had to' (line 7).

She formulates the situation of having her education at home as being 'not really a thing' (lines 10–11), thus serving to normalize it. S20's preoccupation with accounting for her homeschooling is derived from having had previous experience being questioned about it and having it frowned upon by peers (lines 13–14). She therefore sets up an immediate contrast whereby many people in the UK have made explicit her cultural difference to them in terms of education and also social interactions, even going as far as to question its legality (line 15). She presents herself as someone who is used to defending what she has always known to be normal. This comprises the first grounds for her feelings of loneliness, and one which has been beyond her control due to family circumstances and the inadvertently exclusionary enquiries from her British peers. The normality of homeschooling is reinforced further via the emphasized reported speech '<oh yeah we home school>' in response to the interviewer's comment that he did not realize that this was the case in her home country. Her orientations to working up the normality of the practice seem therefore to have been prolonged slightly by the interviewer's surprise in his well meaning but implicitly 'othering' statement.

She positively assesses her mother's efforts to educate her by herself by deploying the superlative form in 'did her very best' (line 17), a move which seems designed to guard S20 against perceptions of ingratitude in the comments she is about to make regarding her mother's efforts falling short of expectations. She thus presents a second justifiable grounds for loneliness, due to the fact that she took on the burden of educating herself. Not only is she presented as having very limited peer interactions in a school environment, she also has minimal interactions with her family when learning at home. In lines 23–24 she describes the consequences

of having few opportunities for friendships, where for ‘two years’ she was ‘just <incredibly> (.) incredibly lonely↑ and depressed’. The emphasis on the ‘two’ makes this duration hearable as an abnormally long period of time to feel lonely. This is compounded by a repetition of the intensifier ‘incredibly’, and a drawn-out delivery of the word in the first instance. The isolation that has been worked up prior to this point has been designed to make logical the extreme nature of the emotions she describes in this section. Her feelings are conveyed as becoming so overwhelming that she considered the prospect of taking her own life. The critical nature of her feelings is then reinforced again to warrant the extreme disclosure, where she described having ‘felt so completely isolated and alone’ (line 6). Given how maximal her descriptions are of her feelings they function as an extreme case formulation.

She continues in the next lines to describe the source of her frustration at ‘nobody’ being able to understand her, by which she is referring to her feelings about social isolation. She presents another contrast whereby she recounts feelings of guilt at feeling the way she did. She compares herself to peers who have been abused by their families or bullied and formulates them as having true grounds for feeling depressed, lonely and suicidal. The implication is that she herself had no cause to feel this way given her seemingly privileged position of having never been bullied or abused (lines 30–35). She presents her former self, then, as someone who was harshly critical of her own distress, and by implication as someone unable to cope with the management of her loneliness.

Her next temporal transition concerns her move to a school in the UK to start studying for her GCSEs. She first mentions this in lines 22–23, but only now returns to it in line 41. In comparison to the total isolation of her domestic education, she presents herself as having formed a friendship within school with a girl in her year. Even this is construed as being deficient however, given that she ‘only’ knew this one individual, and that she socialized with the ‘popular group’ (lines 42–43). S20’s description of these school peers is interesting, in that she implicitly formulates them as being potentially unresponsive to newer school friends and exclusionary in their social interactions. Individuals who are unable to demonstrate their own popularity are unlikely to be welcomed by such a group. None of this is verbalized explicitly, and yet

the meaning is still recoverable from the interaction by virtue of category membership (Stokoe 2012). This is given as a third grounds for her former loneliness, in that her one friendship technically brought her within the orbit of the ‘popular group’, but without any of the social or emotional benefits it might otherwise have provided. The result was a feeling of loneliness due to not knowing how to interact with such people (line 44), and of having only the *appearance* of friendships.

Before we proceed to the second half of S20’s narrative, let us first take a moment to summarize the stages of her narrative so far, and the interactional work she has provided to manage her accountability for the feelings of loneliness she has disclosed. She has thus far mentioned three separate events told in chronological order: her family’s movement between two countries, the homeschooling she received from her mother and then by herself, and her formation of a friendship in her British school which brought further difficulties around feeling socially isolated. Each episode is provided to highlight how S20 has, through no fault of her own, been excluded from social interactions with her peers. When opportunities to socialize have presented themselves, they have been construed as either limited in scope (e.g. the several schools she attended briefly across her two countries) or as interactions with people she is unable to find common ground with (the ‘popular group’). In the next section, which immediately follows the previous extract, S20 describes in more detail the two-year duration of her lonely period.

**Extract 5.7b** Student 20 (female, second year), continued...

S20: (0.6) most (.) >a lot of my friends were  
older< than me:: (0.6) when I was younger  
(0.6) erm (.) so I didn’t fit in to my  
like peer group↑ (1.0) erm (.) so for  
those two years (1.0) there was a lot of  
really lonely moments (.) of just like  
(0.6) I’d basically (.) I’d >did really  
well in my GCSEs cos I’d just go and try  
and hang out< <with teachers↑> (.) cos I  
like got on with adults more=

- Int: [mm huh huh huh huh huh]
- S20: =(1.0) erm (2.0) and then (.) just find work to do:: (1.0) the typical (.) like >go sit in the toilet to eat your lunch cos you don't wana face< HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH fpeople kind of (1.0) .hh but not from <being bulliedf> (.) so it was a very (1.6) <unique> flonelinessf huh huh huh
- Int: mm (1.0) did you ever (.) talk to anyone about how you were feeling
- S20: yeah:: (0.6) so:: (.) at the time (.) my parents have always been really (1.0) supportive (.) and (.) like really good listeners (0.6) I didn't feel comfortable=
- Int: mm
- S20: =(0.6) I thought it was normal (0.6) to feel like that lonely (.) and that depressed (0.6) and one of the things I often share is that (.) I felt like (.) for about a year I was just crying myself to sleep every night (.) and I thought=
- Int: mmm
- S20: =that was normal↑ (.) I just thought "oh it's like (.) what growing up means (.) du du du du der (0.6) [so I didn't really=
- Int: [so you had no yardstick to compare it to
- S20: =exactly (.) exactly (.) academically I had no yardstick (.) emoti- (.) it was just a bit (0.4) yeah

Having disclosed the existence of a single friend in the early part of her schooling in Britain, S20 then proceeds to discuss how many of her subsequent friendships were with people older than herself. When she says 'older' (line 46), this implicitly refers to adults who are much older than herself rather than peers who are older by one or two years: this is confirmed later on in the interview when her friends are described as being in their late 20s and 30s. The inclusion of this performs crucial

interactional work in demonstrating her ability to be sociable when the conditions are more favourable to her, for example when she is able to meet more mature individuals with similar interests. Thus, whilst she felt unable to 'fit into my like peer group' (line 47), her social progression is presented along temporal lines with her becoming increasingly able to be sociable, and therefore less lonely in the process. She constructs her loneliness as being inadvertently beneficial for GCSE grades, given that she attempted to 'hang out' with teachers and to socialize with adults more generally. This is formulated in tandem with a predisposition that she 'got on with adults more' (line 51), thus implying her past loneliness was contingent on socializing with the wrong kind of peer, that is those individuals of her own age.

She invokes a trope of someone who feels the need to withdraw from potential social interactions in order to conceal having few friends, something she construes as 'the typical (.) like >go sit in the toilet to eat your lunch cos you don't wana face <HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH people' (lines 53–55). This script formulation presents these actions as a culturally recognizable behaviour, even if the interlocutor has no personal experience of such behaviour. Her delivery of this is couched in both smiley voice and an extended instance of laughter, thus downplaying the potential embarrassment this admission is likely to cause the speaker. Once again she reiterates the fact that her motivations were not derived from fearing her peers (i.e. from being bullied), but rather from a sense of social embarrassment and critical awareness at being seen to be different. Her formulation of this as a 'unique' form of loneliness invites comment. For example, it seems to contradict her previous construction of the 'typical' social-aversive behaviour at school lunch times. The labelling of its supposed uniqueness seems to be an extreme case formulation, to emphasize the sense of it being normatively transgressive, even if it is not in fact unique.

Given the severity of her feelings and the duration for which they lasted, the interviewer then asks whether she disclosed her loneliness to anyone. She affirms, before evaluating her parents as 'really supportive' and 'good listeners' in line 60. Even though she does not explicitly state that she confided in her parents, the positioning of her positive assessment in response to the question creates a hearable connection between

the two. She begins to state that she did not feel comfortable telling them, despite the attributes she talked them up as having. Whilst the precise reason for not telling her parents is never made clear, S20 does go on to construct her previous perception of loneliness being normal, and a part of growing up. Not only this, but she talks up the severity of the feelings by stating 'I was just crying myself to sleep every night' (lines 65–66). All of this behaviour is presented as her normal state for those two years, highlighting it as both routine and dysfunctional. Also, the fact that she was overwhelmed with sadness to the point of tears for not just one night, but every night for two years once again acts as an extreme case formulation. Her former self is thus defined primarily in relation to the absence of social contact, and the accompanying emotional support it would provide.

One final point to note concerning her temporal progression from loneliness to a more socially interactive self concerns the notion of contrast itself. S20 has spent a lot of time at this point in the interview talking her interlocutor through the past several years of her life, and the perspective she provides for that former self comprises one which does not know any other state of being than loneliness. Her acculturation from one country to another, and from one peer group to another, forms the basis of her attitude towards social interactions and her own self-worth. This is something that is represented as unfolding over time and through various changes of circumstance. The stake she has in managing her loneliness is reduced entirely, given that constraint after constraint has prevented her from displaying any meaningful form of agency around her social life. This student's narrative is thus certainly one of the more extreme, and frankly affecting, across the entire interview data set. As she and the interviewer both state towards the end of the extract, she had (notice her own use of the past tense) no 'yardstick' against which to compare herself. The implication is that now she has such an overview of her feelings, she is able to formulate an absence of social interactions no longer as a personal failing, but as a temporary feature of her current environment.

In summary, then, the examples we have seen have shown that appeals to experiences of loneliness prior to university often correlate with the student negatively evaluating themselves as the source of

their loneliness. This self-ascription of agency is not seen to the same degree in most of the other student interviews, and thus the implication is allowed that for them, loneliness has not necessarily been temporary or context-driven, but part of a longer narrative trajectory. It is perhaps worth noting that both of these students, S1 and S20, sought to participate in the research interviews in order to reflect specifically on their experiences of loneliness. This only became apparent over the course of the interviews and was confirmed by both of them during informal conversation after the tape recorder was switched off. For most of the students, loneliness forms a unsettling and unanticipated part of their university lives, albeit one which is transient and contextually bound to certain milestones in the academic calendar (such as Welcome Week). For other students like S1 and S20 however, loneliness seemingly forms part of who they are as social beings, and they orient to it in very different ways compared to their peers. This places them as exceptions to the general trends outlined above, though one wonders to what extent this would be reversed if students who have experienced enduring loneliness had participated in greater numbers.

## Conclusion

There is a fascinating pattern that has become observable over the course of the analysis, where there is a tendency for the students to locate loneliness within a past version of the self, and by implication not within the current self. For the students, loneliness is almost always correlated with their first week at university, or even their entire first year of their degree programme. Where the student is in their first year, this trend continues with the location of a lonely former self within school, college, or even in a former first year if they have changed degree. The interactional issue at stake is primarily identity management in the here and now of the research interview. The severity of the loneliness, its duration and its episodic nature are all mustered to modulate by implication how the student must be feeling in the present moment. This is something that is worthy of further investigation, given that such issues may arise in the course of pastoral support provided to students, and

where reformulation tactics such as this may mask underlying feelings of social isolation.

We have also seen that temporal contrasts can work both ways. In some cases the loneliness may be located within the past, thus presenting the present self as more socially engaged. In other cases loneliness is implied to exist in the present moment, whereas a sociable past has been talked up prior to the students' arrival at university. These latter contrasts have been dealt with elsewhere in the chapter on invoking social credentials, and so to avoid unnecessary duplication they have only been given a cursory mention here. A final comment that is worth making here concerns overt mentions of loneliness. Very few students make explicit present feelings in their disclosures of loneliness. Locating it in the past is interactionally less costly, given that inferences may not necessarily be drawn about the sociability of the speaker in the present. They also do not need to attend to the stake they have in accounting for loneliness if the feelings and experiences they describe are of an historic nature. Historic descriptions of loneliness thus function as an important rhetorical device for enacting defeasibility, that is for managing the disclosure of category-relevant information sequentially so that inferences can be denied or reformulated if needed.

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# 6

## Conclusions

### The Main Arguments of This Book

Over the course of this book, I hope to have shown how we can glean insights about those university students who experience loneliness by paying close attention to the way in which their accounts of it are formulated. I hope to have provided a new way of looking at how we talk about loneliness for scholars of emotion, and I also hope to have demonstrated the relevance of Discursive Psychology in the analysis of loneliness talk, that it offers something new to say with regard to how people collaboratively make sense of their experiences. The main points of this work may be summarized with the following statements.

#### **(I) Language is social action, not a ‘window on the mind’**

This study is a departure from cognitive conceptualizations of loneliness, which treats it as an inner mechanism waiting to be unlocked within the mind of the individual. The literature on loneliness so far has overwhelmingly been conducted from a cognitive standpoint, with a focus on trying to explain the inner workings of the mind and the reasons why people are lonely. The view I espouse here is one which treats loneliness as a

physiological response which individuals imperfectly try to describe and account for. As Edwards (1999: 272) very helpfully puts this position:

The approach taken to everyday psychological concepts is that these are the bases on which people, for better or worse, actually describe and account for things. They are not concepts that need to be tested to see if they are accurate representations of the real life of the mind. Their empirical basis is discursive; their uses can be recorded and transcribed, and we can analyse them. If people use them inconsistently, indexically, rhetorically, then that is precisely what we need to study.

Thus, the study of loneliness, like any other psychological notion (such as emotion, memory, desire and so on) is most reliably analysed on the basis of what one can observe about it, and how people invoke it in conversation. We have seen that language both constructs and reflects the society in which it occurs, and thus the potential for the process we label as loneliness to be talked up or down is a very real one.

## **(II) The language we use to talk about loneliness is bound up with the ways in which we account for it**

From the moment we invoke the concept of loneliness, we immediately begin to engage in impression management around it. Talking about loneliness, and especially disclosing experiences of it, has the potential to allow negative inferences to form about our character and our social interactions. There is a risk of seeming either unsociable or socially repellent. If I may refer back to the quote, I used at the opening of this book:

Loneliness is one of the most powerful human experiences, not only because it signals the absence of social connections, but also because *the failure to experience loneliness appropriately* calls into question one's very nature as a social being.

(Wood 1986: 184, my emphasis)

There has already been much said about the material nature of isolation, of being apart from peers or family members, and how this exacerbates our physiological responses. However, there has been less focus on the

social and cultural norms which we orient ourselves to when talking about loneliness. Wood's quote captures this interactional aspect very well, in that we have to be seen to recognize the undesirability of our aloneness when it arises in conversation. Failing to perform this necessary orientational work can leave our interlocutors with the damaging impression that one is socially deviant, in that we have given up entirely on the prospect of sociality. This could well have the effect of reinforcing one's loneliness, and so this interactional nature of disclosures needs to be analysed as a matter of priority.

### **(III) Students invoke a range of discursive and rhetorical tactics to demonstrate that they are sociable people, despite having just disclosed loneliness**

The final main argument of this book is that the university students interviewed account for their loneliness in ways which attend to inferences about their sociability. Firstly, they invoke constraints, whereby predispositions and personality traits are marshalled for the purpose of talking up distractions from one's social interactions. For example, if one is so busy, diligent and preoccupied with academic work, then unfortunately one does not have time to see friends regularly. Such constraints deflect attention away from lived experiences of loneliness by highlighting other traits which present them in a more favourable light. Other constraints are invoked via references to circumstances beyond one's control, such as not having enough disposable income to socialize, having to work part-time at the expense of maintaining meaningful friendships, and finding oneself out of step with social norms around leisure time. All of these present their actions and construed lonely feelings as normatively *appropriate* (harking back to Wood's quote) in response to a problem which is presented as external to them.

Secondly, the students invoke social credentials as a way of downplaying seriousness or the temporal status of their disclosures of loneliness. Students spend a considerable amount of time talking up a social predisposition or social circle so that their interviewer is only able to draw negative inferences about their circumstances rather than themselves. For those who feel lonely, friendship is a valuable currency, and it is one the students talk about themselves as being particularly rich

in even if other parts of the interview may suggest otherwise. Thirdly, the students draw parallels about their identities over time in order to highlight the temporary nature of loneliness. Most often loneliness is talked of as a feature of their past, leaving the interviewer to infer that it does not comprise a part of their present. This distinction between two identities is an important rhetorical move for managing how they are perceived in the moment of the interview. Periods of time are also invoked to manage suggestions of accountability for one's actions. The speakers regularly distance themselves from, or reclaim, their agency in lonely situations, and this is something that is represented as being in flux over time.

Finally, the students implicitly invoke a series of rhetorical contrasts in their accounts of loneliness. For some this means calling into question the very definition of loneliness, and by extension, their membership of the category of 'loner' or 'lonely individual'. For others it involves presenting loneliness as a temporary state rather than as an inherent quality of their personality. What this monograph has shown, then, is that the university students interviewed carefully manage their disclosures of loneliness by invoking contrasts around causation, temporality, category membership and agency. These discursive strategies are therefore of significant interest to future research which aims to investigate student experiences of higher education and also individuals' loneliness talk more generally.

## Concluding Thoughts

A Discursive Psychological to loneliness emphasizes the primacy of investigating loneliness discussions in the social interactions where they take place. This study has set out a list of underlying assumptions and principles on which researchers can engage with this difficult issue. Individuals are constrained in their ability to make sense of their complex and varied internal experiences when they are presented with research instruments such as the prolific UCLA Scale of Loneliness. To reduce one's experiences to a number is to obscure their fluidity in a range of different social situations and with different interlocutors.

Perhaps above all other psychological concepts, loneliness is especially dynamic in how this asocial experience is marshalled and accounted for in the company of others. We have learned more about the discursive strategies students use when talking about loneliness with a university lecturer (a relative stranger), though we may observe still different behaviours if we had access to similar conversations between students or with a student and their family member(s). This book therefore aims to stimulate research around loneliness which moves away from the reliance on questionnaires and quantitative scales which is currently so dominant in this field. There is fruitful and impactful work to be done on discursive strategies around loneliness in a variety of formal and informal contexts, not least in Higher Education environments. So too is there scope to analyse how individuals broach this topic when the interlocutors are not in close proximity, for example via computer-mediated communication (e.g. emails, forum posts).

The importance of analysing specifically the lecturer–student conversational dynamic around this topic is paramount for informing the pastoral roles which many lecturers possess, for example as personal tutors. Knowing when not to take a student’s word about how they are feeling as a wholly reliable indicator of their experiences can help guide the outcomes of personal tutorials and lead to tutors recognizing more readily when a student requires additional support. Given that the prospect of loneliness vanishing as an issue within the higher education sector is a very remote one, it is one therefore we should pay closer attention to. There are clear trends for an increasing incidence of loneliness within universities, and it is a problem which impacts on student well-being and retention. A large part of the issue is that loneliness can be difficult to admit, it can be embarrassing, and to many it is a source of shame. Perhaps by making explicit the ways in which we present ourselves to others, or when we disclose our own feelings of loneliness, then perhaps we can transform this into a conversation which normalizes and demystifies those feelings.

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